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OR,
Tracking the Red Cross Gang.

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AUTHOR OF "SLEEPLESS-EYE, THE PACIFIC DETECTIVE," "GIT THAR OWNEY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
TO THE RESCUE!
"THAT'S my mule!"

The voice that uttered these words was gruff and stern, and the speaker was a man who evidently would not be trifled with. His coarse pantaloons, heavy boots and rough blue shirt indicated that he was a miner, while the readiness with which his hand sought the butt of the heavy six-shooter in his belt showed that he was accustomed to defend his rights to the death when occasion demanded.

The scene was a mountain pass on the borders of the famous Black Forest of Arizona. The afternoon shadows were creeping over the pines and cedars, and blending the millions of trees into one solid, dark mass. A black wall of mighty trunks and deep-green verdure skirted one side of the narrow path, while the other was

THE GIANT HORSEMAN'S HUGE HANDS HELD THE NECKS OF GILA JIM AND SANDY
AS IN A VISE, ONE ON EACH SIDE OF HIM!

a yawning chasm, cleft by some convulsion of nature in the dim past, and rending the mountain hundreds of feet to its very heart.

The person to whom the words were addressed was a slightly-built, youthful fellow, dressed in "Eastern" attire, and with all the outward attributes of a "tenderfoot." He was riding a horse, and it was this horse which the other had claimed.

The young fellow had not seen the miner until he spoke, a turn in the path having hidden him previously, and when he did break into view with the peremptory claim on the horse, the "tenderfoot" only looked surprised without betraying any fear.

"Waal, neow," he retorted, "I'm mighty glad I know whose mule this is. If ye hadn't 'a' told me I might 'a' thought it was my own, seein' as I paid a hundred dollars for it, last night. Down in old Vermount, where I was raised, we generally allow a man owns a thing he pays for."

"Not when it's been stolen beforehand," declared the miner. "I don't know how they manage things in Vermount, but in Arizona, when we find a man sitting on another man's horse there is generally a funeral in the neighborhood. So get off!"

With sudden fierceness, the miner had drawn his six-shooter and pointed it at the Vermonter's head.

"Don't get excited!" drawled the young man, as he threw one of his long legs over the saddle and slid easily to the ground. "Don't get excited, Gila Jim."

The miner started and muttered an oath.

"Who told you my name?"

"Seems to me as I heard it down in old Vermount. Seems to me as I know something more about you than just your name, and seems to me that if there is any horse-stealing goin' on around these here parts, Gila Jim could tell more about it than any man within a hundred miles of the head of Bill Williams's Fork."

"Curse you!" howled Gila Jim, as he pulled the trigger of his revolver and fired full in the face of the Vermonter.

"You see, Gila," went on the other, calmly, without changing his position, "if my time had come I think I should have known it. But you can blaze away six times with that gun of yours and there won't be no harm done."

Jim's response was to fire again straight in the face of the tantalizing Vermonter.

"No use, Gila; you hain't got a ball cartridge about you!"

For one instant Gila stood, petrified with astonishment. Then, grasping his revolver by the barrel, he sprung toward the other, but like a flash the young man's left hand flew beneath the lapel of his neat black sack coat, and, bang! Jim's revolver was knocked from his hand and went tumbling down the ravine while the Vermonter still leaning carelessly on his horse, held a bright silver-mounted pistol ready for instant action.

"A trick I learned in old Vermount, Gila. It saves bloodshed and keeps a fellow's hand in good shooting practice. Now stand right where you are while I talk to you, you big lubber!"

"Who are you?" demanded Jim, with suppressed ferocity.

"Me? Oh, I'm Josh White, of Vermount."

"And when did you steal that horse?"

"I did not steal that horse, Gila. You can't bluff me with that sort of talk; in fact, I don't bluff worth cent; and as we never allow it in old Vermount I don't propose to allow it now. I am on my way to Mezuto City, or was, when you got in my road and commenced firing blank cartridges at me."

"What are you going to do at Mezuto City?"

"I don't know that it is any of your business, Jimmy! We don't consider it good manners in old Vermount for a stranger to ask leading questions. Howsoever, I guess I'll let you go along with me and then you can see what my business is when I get there. I suppose I am allowed to visit the place as long as I behave myself. Guess it is like any other mining town, where they are glad to see even a tenderfoot as long as he has some rocks."

"I ain't on my road to Mezuto City this trip," assurred Jim, sullenly.

"Oh, yes you are! I want you to go along. Down in old Vermount they always said that when Josh White wanted anything he was going to have it as long as the harness didn't give out, and I allow that what applied in Vermount goes in Arizona."

"I don't know about that."

"Don't you? Well, I do, d'ye see?"

Gila made a motion as if he would fly at the man in the path, but a glance at the silver-mounted pistol held so steadily in the thin but sinewy hand warned him that he might go too far with the good-natured, but evidently determined Vermonter.

"If you are a square man you will give me that horse and let me go on my road," growled Jim.

"Well, if you ain't got more cheek than anything I ever met, even in old Vermount," laughed Josh White. "You know, Gila, that you lie— Oh, don't jump like that and feel in your

belt. Your little hatchet of a gun is at the bottom of the canyon— You lie when you say that this is your horse. I bought him of an honest man as you can find between Kansas City and the Pacific."

Jim ground his teeth in impotent rage.

"Now, Gila, turn round and walk in front of me. We are both going to Mezuto City. It is some little distance, and I want to get in before the festivities are over. There is a crowd of the boys from the plains in to-night, and I guess they are making the old place howl. Turn round, Jimmy."

"What do you take me for?" cried Gila, defiantly, as he planted his feet more firmly on the ground.

"What do I take you for? Well, I take you for—a man with the Red Cross on his back!"

"Hush! 'S-s-sh!"

The brown hue of Gila's face had turned to a sickly yellow, his eyes were dilated, and his whole form trembled as if with palsy. He was scared nearly to death.

"Wh-what do you mean?" he gasped hoarsely, trying to control his quavering speech.

"Nothing in particular," was the careless reply. "Won't you turn round and trot along toward Mezuto City?"

"And will you give me away when we get there?"

The fearful anxiety with which Gila looked in the face of the young fellow, who, with a slight smile playing round his lips, stood with his right arm resting on the saddle of the horse, while his left hand still held the pistol with its muzzle in a straight line with Gila Jim's forehead, was startling in its intensity.

It was as if the desperado knew that his fate hung in the balance, which might be turned either way by a touch of the careless fingers of the man from "old Vermount."

"I'll go!" he whispered, through his blue-white lips. "I'll go!"

"Thought so. Right about face—march! as we used to say in the Sheep's Gray Guards, in old Vermount."

Without another word, Gila Jim turned and walked slowly along the narrow path between the border of cedars and pines and the precipice on the other side.

Josh White sprung lightly into his saddle, after replacing his revolver in the belt beneath his sack coat, and walked his horse on after the cowed desperado.

There was a curious smile on the face of Josh now—a smile wholly different from the careless, good-natured chuckle of the Vermonter. It was that of a man of the world, who had established to his own satisfaction a fact of which he was only partly aware before.

"I have you now, Gila," his thoughts ran. "The Red Cross is already doing its work!"

The two proceeded along the path for a few hundred yards, Gila occasionally kicking loose stones over the bluff in a vicious manner, and Josh steering his horse carefully between the huge boulders that lay scattered here and there, when the trail turned abruptly into the forest, a high wall of rock blocking further progress along the edge of the cliff.

Gila Jim stopped and looked back, hesitatingly.

"Go on, James; we ain't there yet," said Josh White.

"I daren't go in there," muttered Gila, huskily.

The shadows that had been giving gradual warning of the coming of night were heavy and deep in the forest, and the narrow opening through which the path led looked like a black-hole that might end in the other world.

"Go on, James! You are not the man to be scared at the dark, are you? Why, we'd laugh at a fellow like you in old Vermount."

Gila stood leaning against a tree, looking at his tormentor with a hunted expression on his rough features such as they had perhaps never worn before in his life.

Who was this mysterious man, who, with the appearance of a green New Englander, who might never have been away from his native town before, yet had managed to back down Gila Jim, acknowledged to be the toughest man in Arizona? Where did this Josh White, as he called himself, acquire his knowledge of men's closest secrets, and how did he know that somebody had been fooling with Gila Jim's revolver and ammunition, and left him at any one's mercy, with scraps of paper in his cartridges instead of bullets? And then, his reference to the Red Cross! How had he learned that the fatal mark was indelibly stamped between his shoulders?

"Come, James, get along! We shall never make Mezuto City this way," said Josh White, good-naturedly.

"Look a-here! Who are you, anyhow?" Jim desperately demanded.

"I told you. I'm Josh White, of Stumps Center, Vermount, and I'm out for my health. Walk on, Gila, walk along, like a little man!"

The other gave one more glance at his strange companion, and plunged resignedly into the recesses of the forest.

It was pitch dark for a little way where the branches of the trees thickly interlaced. Then

it became more open, and Josh White could just distinguish Gila Jim's form moving doggedly along in the shadows.

Again the path suddenly swerved, this time to the right, and Gila stepped out of the gloom to a broad plateau upon which the rays of the just rising moon were casting a feeble illumination.

"It is a good four miles to Mezuto City yet," grumbled Gila, "and I'm tired as a dog. I'm thinking this will be a bad night's work for you, Mr. Vermonter. I have a good many friends in this section who will help me to run down any man as plays dirt on me."

"Do they all wear the Red Cross?"

As if a serpent had stung him, Gila started and walked on across the plain, while Josh White smiled grimly, tramping on behind.

"We have to pass through that gulch to the right, eh, Jim?" remarked the horseman an hour later, as the two approached a rift in the mountain that had loomed into view in the dark.

"Yes."

"Good place for an ambush, eh, Jim?"

"Mighty good."

"Ever done any business there, Jim?" went on the Vermonter, quietly.

"See here, Mr. White, I'm an honest miner, who tends to his business, and never pulls on no man 'cept a horse-thief and a fellow who plays the fifth ace in a poker-game, and I don't want no insinuations."

"Go on, Jimmy; I'm through."

The gorge through which they were now walking was indeed suggestive of surprises from a lurking foe. But a few yards wide, with a mountain on each side, firs growing singly and in clumps here and there, and narrow paths running zigzag up the rocks at intervals, their road was not one to have been chosen by a person who feared enemies in his vicinity.

It was evident that Josh White had no such fear, for he rode calmly along with that inscrutable smile on his almost youthful features, but with his eyes ever watchful of his prisoner, as if he had no other thought in the world than to reach Mezuto City in due time, and to make Gila Jim go with him.

What his business might be in Mezuto City was for the present his own secret.

Hallo! What was that?

Josh White's quick ear had caught a slight rustling sound among the rocks above him, and his revolver was already in his hand as he reined in his horse and listened.

There was a hissing in the air, a something flashing before his eyes; then a lariat dropped around the body and pulled his arms to his side so that he could not move them. At the same time his horse started forward and Josh White lay on his back on the ground, as helpless as a trussed chicken.

"Geewhillikins! This is a nice way to handle a stranger. We should call this rather personal down in old Vermount!" he muttered.

"Oho, Mr. Vermonter, how's this?" chuckled Gila Jim, as he sprung toward his fallen enemy. "That was well cast, Sandy," he added, as a big, red-whiskered man joined him, hauling in the lariat, hand over hand, so as not to loosen the noose on Josh's arms.

"Yes, I was sitting up there when I see you coming up the gulch, and I could tell from the position of yer relative surroundings that there was some perplexity on the part of one of the gentlemen concerned, so I presumed that if I was to describe a natural circle and embrace the individual now recumbent on the ground, I should be doing you a service and showing my own dexterity at the same moment."

The big man paused for breath and gave Josh White a playful kick in the ribs with his heavy boot.

"Oh, let up on your dictionary words, Sandy," said Gila Jim; "but I'm mighty glad you were here all the same."

"Who is his prostrate nobs?" asked Sandy, as he pulled the rope a little tighter on Josh White's arms.

"A man that knows too much!"

"So?" ejaculated Sandy, with a soft whistle.

"You know what must be done with him?"

"The usual?"

"The usual."

During this short colloquy Josh White had lain quite still without any attempt to fight against the odds which his experience told him were all in favor of his enemies. He was not the man to wear himself out by trying to tear down stone walls with his finger-nails. He bided his time and kept every sense on the alert.

"Take him back?" asked Sandy, with a deferential glance at Gila Jim.

"Yes. The boys in camp?"

"Most of 'em. Two or three of them have gone down to Mezuto to do a little business to-night, with the bull-jerkers, but the rest are all at home."

"Good! Gather him up."

With a dexterity that seemed quite natural in the man who had lassoed Josh so easily and effectively, Sandy threw the slack of his long lariat around the legs of the Vermonter and put in half a dozen knots that made the captive feel as if he were built up in a barrel of plaster-of-paris.

"Now, Jim, give me a heave!" called out Sandy. " Swing him across the saddle, and we can steady him with our hands until we get him into camp."

The moon was high in the heavens, and its pale light fell full on the three men and the quiet horse who stood waiting for orders.

Sandy stooped at the head of the Vermonter, while Gila caught hold of the feet.

"Up with him, Jim!"

But, Gila was looking at something over Sandy's shoulder with a horror that brought the sickly yellow to his face and made his knees knock together as with the ague.

"Sandy!"

"Well, what's the distortion of yer constitution no w?"

"It is there again!"

"What?"

"The Giant Horseman!"

Sandy looked in the face of Gila with dilated eyeballs and trembling lips from which no sound issued. He dared not look behind him.

The sight which met the riveted gaze of Gila was indeed one that might have terrified the boldest.

A gigantic horse, jet-black, with long, flowing mane and tail, his head, proudly carried, so high that an ordinary man could not have reached his bridle, while his deep chest, his sturdy legs and broad flanks bespoke at once strength and speed. On his back a man who, standing on the ground, would have been, seemingly, nearly eight feet tall—a man of mighty thigh and sinew—a man who could have broken the neck of either of the precious partners with one wrench of his enormous finger and thumb—a man who, with his dark eyes flashing in the moonlight, and his pale face looking preternaturally white in contrast with his black mustaches, seemed the Nemesis of the two trembling wretches, arrested so suddenly in their moment of fancied triumph.

The horse and man were well matched.

For at least a minute, Gila Jim, gazed dumfounded at this giant horse and giant rider, while Sandy kept his eyes on the face of his partner.

Josh White did not speak, but looked at Gila Jim with that curious smile which we have noticed before; then, as if breaking the spell, with a tremendous effort, Gila Jim suddenly stooped and picked up the pistol that had dropped from Josh White's hands when he was caught in the noose.

With an oath, he leveled the weapon at the Giant Horseman and pulled the trigger. A report rung out, that sent back echoes down the gulch.

But the shot went spinning harmlessly away.

The giant evidently was ready for some such act, for before the shot could be fired, the big steed at one bound stood over the still recumbent form of the young Vermonter, while the Giant Horseman's huge hands held the necks of Gila Jim and Sandy as in a vise, one on each side of him!

CHAPTER II.

WITH KNIVES, TO THE DEATH.

WHILE Josh White and Gila Jim were travelling in the direction of Mezuto City, things were exceedingly lively there.

A town that had suddenly sprung into existence when a vein of gold was discovered that indicated an abundance of the precious metal in the vicinity, Mezuto City was as odd and picturesque a combination of board shanties, overhanging rocks and deep-green shrubbery as the whole State of Arizona could produce. The main street, in which every other house was a saloon or dance-hall, on this night was a blaze of light and a turmoil of humanity.

There had been a round-up on the plains, and the cowboys, after getting through with their work, had been paid off, and were in Mezuto City for a good time.

They were having it.

From the neighboring hills the miners had come down, and the two sets of men, together with the floating population of Mezuto City, were in the very flood-tide of good-fellowship.

In a saloon, about midway down the street, were gathered a dozen men, watching the operations of four who were seated at a table in one corner playing cards.

Two of the men were cowboys, the other two miners.

"I'll take that pot," said one of the miners—a man with a very long, sharp nose—as he reached for the money with a large brown hand.

"Hold on thar, stranger," said one of the cowboys, with a good-natured smile; "I guess this takes the pot."

"What's that?" asked the long-nosed man.

"This!" returned the cowboy, slapping down an ace triumphantly, and drawing toward him a pile of gold coin that had decorated the middle of the table.

"No, sir! You have already played one ace. I have two, and there is another one in the pack."

"How do you know?"

"None of yer business. Give me that cash."

"Not much!" returned the cowboy.

"Then take that!"

The long-nosed man's hand had gone to his belt for a revolver, but he did not draw it.

"You just hold on there now, Nosey Cripps! We don't do things that way in old Vermount, and I don't propose to allow it here while my health is good. The other man is right, and you are wrong. If there is a fifth ace in this deck of cards, I guess you put it there. So shut your mouth, and don't try to fool with that gun of yours."

"Who are you?" yelled Cripps.

"Never mind, Nosey; I know you, and that's enough, and I've got hold of your arm so tight that you couldn't draw your gun another inch if it was to give you all the gold in the Black Forest. Now, you hear me, Nosey!"

Josh White was holding the long-nosed man's arm, as he hinted, so tightly, that the revolver, drawn half-way from the sheath, remained there, in spite of the struggles of its owner to get it out for use.

The cowboy who claimed the money on the strength of the last ace he had produced, was standing up, with his hand ready to reach his weapon in case Josh White's hold gave out.

"Look here, stranger," sputtered Nosey, "that man as good as called me a liar, and I don't let no man do that. Just give me a square deal that is all I ask. I'll fight him with guns or bowies, but blame my cats if I want to be held this way behind when I'm trying to settle things in a gentlemanly way. Let go my arms and let's fight it out."

"That's what!" chorused the cowboys. "Give the man a show."

"All right, boys, I believe in that. We always do things in that way down in old Vermount. So go at each other, and may the Lord preserve the honest man if there is one of you worthy the name."

As he spoke Josh White released the arm of the long-nosed miner and stepped back.

Two revolvers leaped from their sheaths and two shots made the glasses and bottles dance behind the bar and filled the room with smoke.

But the bullets had both lodged in the rough logs of the ceiling; for Josh White was standing between the two men with a hand on each pistol!

"Thought it best to knock your weapons up toward the ceiling," he drawled, coolly. "Down in old Vermount, when there is a fight, we generally allow to have it fixed so that the crowd can enjoy the fun without too much danger. Guess you had better use knives."

The combatants were thoroughly aroused now. The smell of powder had stirred up all the fighting blood in both, and they cared not what weapons they used as long as they got at each other without delay.

The cowboy was a tall, splendidly-formed fellow, with a frank, open face, but with a deadly gleam in his bright blue eyes now that boded no good to his foe unless he was very expert in the use of his weapon.

"Boys, take their guns away and hold them apart while they draw their toothpicks and start fair. Darned if I want to have to engineer this whole business. It is a new thing to me I never did it down in old Vermount."

The boyish-looking tenderfoot, who was standing now between the two infuriated denizens of a semi-civilized region, did indeed look rather out of place, but his imperturbable good-nature, and moreover certain indications he had given of the possession of steel-like muscles had already won him the respect of the men in the saloon, though they did not know who he was or from whence he came.

Even as he spoke the crowd divided itself into two factions, the cowboys getting over on the side of their representative in the combat, and the runners ranging themselves in the rear of Cripps.

A dozen hands drew the principals away from each other, and took the pistols from their unresisting hands.

Everybody realized that there was to be a fight, and a desperate one, in which cold steel would be the factor instead of blazing gunpowder and whistling bullets.

The table was drawn out of the way, and a space in the center of the room left clear. The landlord of the house, behind his bar, rested his elbows easily on it, and let his chin drop into his hands. Jack White, now that he had set things going according to his notion of how they would be conducted under similar circumstances down in old Vermount, drew back and took no further active part in the proceedings.

Cripps threw off his coat, tightened the belt around his waist, and with his blue shirt open at the top, so that his sinewy neck could be seen, stood, with his long, glittering bowie-knife firmly grasped in his right hand, waiting for the signal to attack.

The cowboy knotted a little more firmly the bright-colored silk handkerchief around his throat, and examined the lacing of his red shirt to see that it was secure. Then he drew his bowie from its sheath, looked keenly and critically at its edge and point, and made sure that the blade was securely fixed in the handle. Then he, too, tightened his belt, and, knife in hand, said he was ready.

"Ready?" asked the landlord, who, by virtue

of his position as man of the house, was tacitly allowed to act as master of ceremonies.

"Ready!" said the cowboy.

"Ready!" came huskily from Nosey Cripps.

"Let 'em go!"

The backers of each man stepped aside.

With a simultaneous bound the combatants reached the middle of the floor, as their knives came together with a clash.

Not a word was spoken.

The two men looked fiercely into each other's eyes as, each grasping the right hand of the other with his own left, he strove to force his knife to the heart of his enemy, and at the same time hold back the blade that was seeking his own life.

There was a brief struggle, and then the two threw themselves back and stood several yards apart, panting, and preparing for another attack.

So far neither had gained any advantage.

Suddenly Cripps stooped and jumped forward, trying to get under the cowboy's guard and stab him before the latter knew his object; but the cowboy was too wary to be caught by such a maneuver. His keen blue eyes had been fixed on his adversary, and he knew some tricks was intended.

As Cripps stooped, so did the cowboy; each threw his arm around the other and the two dropped into a sitting posture, with his knife hand over the shoulder of his foe.

"That's right boys. Take a rest. That's how we used to do in old Vermount when fighting got wearisome."

"Shut up!" growled the landlord, and Josh White, who had allowed himself to make a remark when it was perhaps hardly in order, obeyed the surly landlord without remonstrance.

The combatants now grasped each other in a death hug.

Ah! Nosey Cripps has the cowboy down!

Slowly he forces the prostrate man's head back, and kneels on his right arm.

It looks as if the cowboy's time has come.

There is a slight movement on the part of his friends in the room, as if to aid him.

"Stand back there now!" yells the landlord, fiercely, as he produces his own six-shooter and covers one man who is more demonstrative than his companions.

A triumphant smile steals over Nosey's face as he feels that his foe is helpless. He has the cowboy by the throat and swings aloft his knife but with a superhuman effort, the cowboy has turned over and Nosey is underneath!

Before the cowboys have time to yell their exultation Nosey has in turn forced his foe over, and then they roll over and over so that no one can see whether the blue or the red shirt is in the ascendant.

Each has dropped his knife, and the two weapons are lying within a foot of each other in the middle of the room, while their owners are struggling desperately in a corner.

"Pick them up and break them away!" commands the landlord, and the combatants are pulled apart and dragged into opposite corners of the room to get their breath.

They pant hard as they stand glaring at each other across the room; then, effusive friends having given each his knife, they closed once more.

The cowboy slashes the sleeve of Cripps's blue shirt, but his wrist is caught before the point of his knife touches the flesh.

The spectators are now crowding around the combatants in their interest and excitement, regardless of the growls of the surly landlord, commanding them to stand back.

The men are in close embrace, but in such a position that neither can use his weapon; they swing backward and forward, for a few seconds and then fall heavily to the floor, with the cowboy on top.

The steel-blue eyes are blazing now and Cripps can almost feel them pierce his very soul as they look down into his.

There is no mercy in that terrible look!

Whatever disposition there may have been to give quarter at the commencement of the combat has decidedly died out now. All the tiger that lurks in every human breast is aroused in the powerful young fellow in the buckskin leggings and red shirt who holds his foe down to the ground with the grip of a vise.

Every muscle is standing out on the mighty left arm that holds Cripps as helpless as a baby, while the right, with the bowie firmly grasped, is ready to settle the quarrel finally at one blow.

"Now, do you mean to say I'm a liar?" hissed the cowboy, as he bent low over his foe.

"Yes!" howled Cripps, in a frenzy, as he managed to release his right arm and struggled into a half-recumbent posture.

It was the last word he spoke.

"Hallo, here! What's this—what's this?"

A short fussy man, with a big face, and a big beard and big hat, but with everything else about him rather small including his body and legs, forced his way from the street through the crowd at the door and put his hand on the cowboy's shoulder, just as he arose from the body of his adversary.

The Giant Horseman.

The cowboy shook him off without an effort, and was about to answer, when Josh White interrupted:

"It was a fair and square fight, sheriff, as fair a fight as I ever saw in old Vermount, and this man only acted in self defense."

"That's all right as far as it goes," answered the fussy man with the big face, "but I'm the Sheriff of Cordona county; Arizona, and I'll have to hold this man until after the inquest," and the fussy little man stepped over the inanimate form of Cripps and looked him over critically.

"Yes, a wound in the left side of the chest inflicted with a knife or some sharp instrument, causing death. Um!"

The sheriff took out a large note-book and made some entries in an important manner.

"What's your name?" to the cowboy.

"Samuel Horton."

"Samuel Horton. Your profession?"

"Cattle-driver."

"Cattle drover. Married?"

"No."

"Where do you live?"

"In Cordona county, at Squire Peters's ranch."

"All right. Well, Samuel Horton, you are under arrest until an inquest is held on the body of— By the way, what is that gentleman's name?" pointing to the body.

"His name is Joseph Cripps, but he is generally known as Nosey—"

"On account of his long nose, I suppose," interrupted the fussy little sheriff. "Well, he has got a tremendous smeller, that's a fact. Cover him up."

"Hold on!" thundered Josh White, in a voice so unlike his usual good-natured tones that everybody started.

"What's that, sir? Who are you to interfere with an officer of the law when he gives an order?"

But Josh did not answer. Hastily stooping, he seized the fluttering end of the blue shirt where it had been cut by the cowboy's knife and tore the garment from the shoulders.

"Ha!" he yelled. "I thought so! Sheriff, Samuel Horton did a righteous act. See?"

He was pointing down at the back of the dead Cripps, where the blue shirt had been torn away.

"Look, boys," he cried. "Is it murder to kill a man of this kind?"

Everybody save two miners who had been pals of Cripps, and who were stealing quietly to the door, leaned forward to see what it was at which Josh White's finger was pointing.

Then a yell went up: "No! No! Kill every one of them! Clean them out of the country!"

And the flickering light of the oil lamp fell full on a large, blood-red cross cut into the white flesh of the dead man's back, between the shoulders.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPED!

"CARRY him away and plant him," ordered the sheriff, in a quiet tone. "We don't want any inquest. Samuel Horton, you can go!"

The remains of Nosey Cripps were taken out of a back door and there was a general moving up to the bar, where the sheriff insisted on treating all hands.

But Josh White! Where was he? and where was the stout young cowboy with the steel blue eyes?

Both had disappeared.

The news that there had been a fight in Ugly Dan's saloon had drawn all the loose population of the street to the spot. The saloon was soon packed to the door.

"This way," whispered Josh White to the young cowboy, as they slipped quietly through the crowd and gained the street without exciting attention.

The two walked rapidly to the end of the row of shanties that formed the street, and, turning to the left, found themselves in a lonely spot, where some immense boulders hid them completely from any one who might happen to reach the corner of the street.

The cowboy started back.

"What's the matter?" asked Josh White.

But Horton could only point with trembling finger, while he seemed as if he could not believe his eyes.

"What is it?" he muttered, huskily.

"Nothing to be scared of. A thing like that wouldn't make you hang back if you had been raised in old Vermount."

The bantering tone as much as the words seemed to recall Horton to himself. He shook off the superstitious horror that had been creeping over him and walked forward boldly.

The Giant Horseman!

Like a statue, sat the giant on his immense steed, in the shadow of the rocks.

He betrayed not the slightest impatience or surprise, when Josh White and his companion came into view, and but for the keen glances of his restless dark eyes, that noted everything swiftly and surely, he might indeed have been taken for some wonderful work of art fashioned

into the exact semblance of a more than life-sized man, and placed on a horse carved from brown marble.

"Fernandez!" said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

The voice of the Giant Horseman, though deep and powerful, was singularly sweet.

"Are the prisoners safe?"

"Si, señor."

"That's well."

It was noticeable that there was nothing of the careless young Vermonter about Josh White now. He spoke briefly and in a business-like tone, and one could easily see that his customary manner in the character of a tenderfoot from the distant East was assumed only for a purpose.

What that purpose was will be developed.

"Dismount, Fernandez."

"Si, señor."

The giant swung himself from the saddle, and now, when he stood by the side of his immense steed, the gigantic proportions of both horse and man could be more easily appreciated.

"Pretty large horse, hey?" remarked Josh White, replying to the wonder expressed in the steel-blue eyes of the cowboy. "He stands nearly twenty hands in height. Let's see. Four inches to a hand. Four twenties—eighty. Eighty inches are six feet eight inches, that is, measuring from the neck, just above the shoulders. He lifts his head another foot higher than that, I should judge, and is a pretty noble animal, I consider. Fernandez calls him Nebo, and I guess the two understand each other thoroughly."

A low whinny from Nebo caused Fernandez to take the giant horse's mouth in his hands and fondle its nose.

The noble beast arched his proud neck and tried to get its nose inside the loose cloak of the huge horseman.

The latter smiled, and putting his hand to an inside pocket, drew out some pieces of dried apple and gave them to Nebo.

"Fernandez, let me see the prisoners."

"Si, señor."

Taking the bridle of Nebo over his arm, the Giant Horseman walked along a path that led away behind a mass of rock that seemed carelessly disposed at the foot of the mountain, but that was really arranged with the express view of concealing the entrance to a secret corridor.

With a touch of the hand in a certain place, the whole mass of rock swung aside.

The cowboy and Josh White followed the Giant Horseman behind the rock-gate, which swung back into its place again with a slight push from the hand of the latter.

Though the path was open to the sky, the rift was so deep in the mountain that the moon's rays could not penetrate more than enough to make the darkness visible.

Then there was the crackling of a match and the giant lighted a torch of resinous pine, that cast a weird glare over everything in the corridor, and made Nebo and his master both look larger even than they really were.

The tall form of Fernandez strode ahead, his gaudy Mexican trousers, trimmed with gold beads and his large silver spurs giving him a picturesque appearance that his great size made still more marked.

It was evident from the curious way in which the young Vermonter looked at his surroundings that he was as much a stranger in this secret place as the cowboy.

The Huge Horseman stopped and Nebo uttered a sound of recognition such as most horses will give when they see one of their kind; then Josh's own horse put his head out of a recess in the wall that had been unnoticed by the Vermonter and cowboy, and replied to Nebo's greeting.

"They know each other pretty well, eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

Nebo walked into the recess, which was really a large stable, and Fernandez passed on, followed by his companions.

"You think you would know him now, Sam?" queried the Vermonter of the cowboy, quietly.

"Know him! Ay, if it were fifty years hence I should know him."

"Good! But you must not get excited. We never do that in old Vermount!" assured Josh White, with a touch of his old manner, which he had dropped since leaving the saloon.

"You can depend on me," said the cowboy.

"I am depending on you," was the calm response.

The Giant Horseman, carrying the torch, now stopped at what was apparently the end of the passage, there being nothing but a smooth wall of rock facing them with high walls of the same nature on each side; then he stepped to one corner and the light of his torch revealed a small iron door, not more than five feet high, and only just wide enough to admit a man.

It was secured by three large bolts, which, with the door, were painted to resemble the rocks around them. No one would have noticed the door at a casual glance, nor indeed unless he had looked very closely and known exactly where it was situated.

The Giant Horseman shot back the bolts and drew the door open.

A flood of light burst through the small opening.

The Giant Horseman stepped back and motioned to the Vermonter and cowboy to enter.

Josh White went through the doorway first, uttering an exclamation of surprise and delight as he did so.

"Well, if this doesn't beat any thing I ever saw in old Vermount," he said as the cowboy and Giant Horseman stood beside him. "This is a mighty pretty place you have here, Fernandez."

"Si, señor."

The apartment in which the three men found themselves was indeed enough to call forth the most lavish admiration.

It was about twenty feet square and half that distance in height. The ceiling was a mass of jagged points of irregular shape, which glistened in the light of a dozen torches, stuck in rudely-fashioned sockets on the ground, and made the room seem like a fairy palace.

Not only was the ceiling glistening, but the wall shone in a million coruscations, and the whole effect was simply dazzling.

"What is this in the rock that shines so?" asked Jack White.

"Silver, señor," replied the Giant Horseman, quietly.

"Geewhillikens!" said Josh White, slapping his thigh, as a light broke over him. "Then this must be—"

"The Lost Mine of the Flack Forest, señor, with millions of dollars' worth of silver waiting to be turned into United States or Mexican gold."

The Giant Horseman made this statement gravely, as of one who told an ordinary fact not calling for any astonishment.

Josh White and Sam Horton had both heard of the great silver mine that had been discovered years ago by a prospector who had only lived to get back to Denver and tell his story without leaving any clew to the position of the silver lode that would make a hundred men's fortunes before he fell back into unconsciousness that ended in death.

Now, here it was, in the possession of this strange man, so much above the ordinary stature of mankind, but who showed so unmistakably that his vast bulk and strength were at the complete disposal of the slender, boyish-looking fellow who talked about old Vermount, and called himself a tenderfoot.

"Well, father, you are not very polite, or are you ashamed to present your daughter?" suddenly broke in a silvery voice. "I have been standing in this corner, and here you seem as if you mean to leave me, unless I introduce myself."

The Giant Horseman started, and as he looked over to the corner from whence the voice proceeded, said:

"Bianca, my daughter, this is the capitaine to whom you owe your father's life. The other is his friend, and therefore your friend and mine."

The maiden who came forward into the full glare of the torches to give her hand frankly to Josh White and Sam Horton might have been the fairy presiding over the beautiful retreat in which she stood. Straight, regular features, flashing dark eyes like her father's, with a wealth of blue-black hair coiled gracefully around her queenly head, she was the most lovely girl upon whom either the young Vermonter or the young cowboy had ever gazed.

Her dress was a black velvet riding-habit, trimmed with silver buttons down the front, reaching from the chin to the hem of the skirt, which just hid her feet. Around her waist was a belt, in which two pearl-handled pistols showed themselves from their holsters. At her neck and wrists were a white linen collar and cuffs, while on her hands were brown riding-gloves, fitting, like the rest of her attire, perfectly.

"Senor, my father has told me," she said to Josh White.

The latter looked uncomfortable as he said:

"Your father I couldn't have told you. I did not want him to tell you. Because I managed to wipe out that skulking Apache who was just drawing a bead on him, he seems to think I own him and everything he has."

"Si, señor," said the Giant Horseman.

"All right, Fernandez, have it your own way. Such men as you only seem to get fully ripe in this Western country. We are more picayune down in old Vermount, I must confess."

"Si, señor."

"Eh? Well, you needn't be so ready to agree with me in everything. But it is all right, though; you are a good fellow, Fernandez. Where are those rascally prisoners?"

The Giant Horseman disappeared in the gloom at the end of the cave and in a minute reappeared holding by the shoulder Gila Jim and Sandy, who walked on each side of him with a scowl on their respective countenances.

As soon as they were seen by Sam Horton, he sprang upon Gila Jim and bore him to the earth.

"Hold on, there, Sam!" said Josh White, grasping the infuriated cowboy by the arms. "Remember there is a lady present. Besides, that fellow is handcuffed and it looks

kind of mean to attack a man in that shape, or at least we should think so in old Vermount."

The cowboy seemed to make an effort to restrain himself, and released Gila Jim, who arose to his feet, and holding out his manacled hands, hissed:

"It is well for you that my claws are muffled or—"

"Or, what?" said the cowboy contemptuously. "I think you have done all the injury to me in the past that you could, and now if there is to be any one hurt, it will be you, and not me."

"That's the kind of talk. That's the way we should put it down in old Vermount," chimed in Josh White.

"Oho, Mr. Kidnapper, perhaps we will fix you before we are through with you. You can't take honest men and have them hidden away in underground prisons without some trouble. I have plenty of friends in this section who will never rest until they find Gila Jim."

"Do they know that he wears the Red Cross on his back?"

Gila Jim winced.

"Now, look here, Gila Jim. I know you, I know that you are a member of the band of horse-thieves who were entrapped by Arizona Vigilantes a few years ago, and who were saved from death at the last moment, when the ropes were around their necks, on certain conditions. There were ten in the band and they all agreed to the terms."

Once more Gila Jim asked the question he had put to the young Vermonter several times before. "Who are you?"

"I'm Josh White, of Vermount, but that has nothing to do with what I am saying. One of the conditions was that you should lead the way to a certain silver lode on the borders of the Black Forest. Another that you should not stake a claim until the Vigilantes had all taken what they wanted, but that when they had chosen the claims they wanted to work, you should be allowed to come in with your pals. This was on condition that you acted square. If you or any of your gang did the least crooked thing you were to be bounced from camp and any man was to be allowed to shoot you down at sight. Isn't that correct, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"To make sure that they would recognize you again, Gila Jim, they cut with their bowie-knives a Red Cross in the middle of your back, and that of your nine pals. You were known thenceforth as the Red Cross Gang."

"You know all about it," sneered Gila Jim.

"Yes, that's what they used to tell me down in old Vermount."

"Is that all the story?"

"Not quite all, Gila Jim. You and your pals showed the Vigilantes where the silver was, and Mezuto City was the result. For a time you kept honest. Then you took to stealing horses—"

"You lie!" howled Gila Jim, making a motion toward the quiet-spoken Vermonter.

The Giant Horseman put out his hand and stayed the desperado as easily as if he had been a child, and Josh White coolly went on:

"No, I don't. For a long time you and your gang were suspected, but it was only lately that the proofs were got against you. The men who manned the ropes have nearly all left this section, and the miners and citizens know of the Red Cross Gang only by reputation. Were it otherwise you would be dead before this."

Gila Jim smiled contemptuously.

"What is all this talk about, and what do you want with me?"

"I want justice for your brother."

"My brother!"

"Yes, for your brother, who dares not assume his family name any more than you, and all on account of your crimes," said Josh White, looking straight into Gila Jim's eyes.

"You mean this fellow, I suppose," said Gila Jim, nodding to the cowboy, whose steel-blue eyes glittered, and whose fingers moved nervously as if ready to clutch the desperado by the throat. "I've heard of him. They call him Sam Horton, the crazy cowboy, but I never saw him before. As for me, my name is James Smith. I lived in Gila for ten years, and they call me Gila Jim. There is no mystery about me, and there never is about an honest man."

"Honest!"

"Yes, honest!" said Gila Jim defiantly. "What have you got to say about it?"

"Only that I could get \$25,000 in cold cash by handing you to the police of Chicago for cracking the Eighth National Bank there, and for other jobs, all of which you managed to fasten on your brother, who stands by my side, and who is only known here as Sam Horton."

"A nice story," sneered Gila Jim.

"Now, Gila Jim, your time has come. This case has been put in my hands, and I am going to take you back to Chicago. But before I go I am determined to break up the Red Cross Gang. That is the only reason I did not take you before."

"And who is to prove all this?"

"As for the bank job, that will be easy enough in Chicago. And that you belonged to the Red Cross Gang and were the leader when the Vig-

lantes made their terms with the horse-thieves, can be proved by him."

Josh White pointed to the Giant Horseman, who gravely nodded in acquiescence.

Gila Jim looked up at the latter's face, and then, in utter desperation, dropped his head and ran full tilt into Josh White.

The onslaught was so sudden that the Vermonter was knocked off his feet.

Gila Jim dashed to the door in the corner, and before he could be prevented, had passed through the narrow space and slammed the door behind him, just as two shots rang out and two bullets flattened themselves on its iron panels.

There was a sound of sliding bolts, and the entire party were prisoners.

"Trapped!" said Josh White, grinding his teeth as he regained his feet.

"Si, señor," quietly acquiesced the Giant Horseman.

CHAPTER IV.

IS HE MAN OR DEVIL?

WHEN Gila Jim managed to escape so unexpectedly, he had no clear idea of getting into a place of absolute safety. If he had not been made so desperate when he saw how the toils of the law were being drawn around him, he would probably not have made the dash.

When he got through the iron door and fastened it behind him, he found himself in almost pitch darkness.

Putting his elbow against the wall to guide himself, he walked slowly along the corridor, holding his hands, still secured by the handcuffs, in front of him.

"Curse that Yankee!" he muttered: "and that big fellow, too. I remember him. I have cause to. He has scared me often enough. If it had not been for them, Sam would never have found me. To think that he should have turned up in this part of the country, and I never knew it! Gila Jim, you are in a pretty tight place all around, and it will take all your smartness to get out."

He put his hands between his knees and tried to slip the handcuffs.

"I'm afraid he has made them too tight," he muttered. "If I had any show at all, I know I could get them off."

He gave another tug.

"By gracious, they are coming!"

Another mighty pull, that took all the skin off, and the left hand was free, while the loose handcuff hung dangling from his right wrist.

"That's good enough. I'll let it stay there for a while, until I get out of this."

He looked up and could see the stars shining far above.

"No show that way. I'll have to find the secret of this outlet somehow."

He crawled along, feeling the wall still to guide him.

Suddenly the wall came to an end.

"Hello! What's this? Some kind of an opening. Perhaps another way out."

He cautiously entered the opening in the wall, with his hands extended.

Then he started back with an exclamation of terror.

He had touched something soft and warm!

"Pshaw!" he muttered, while a grim smile passed over his face in the darkness. "Gila Jim, you ought to soak your head. You are getting to be a coward."

He moved forward again, more boldly than before, and placed his hand on the soft, warm object that had given him such a start.

"Darned if that ain't the funniest thing to frighten a man in this section that I ever heard of. If I was to tell the boys, they would never believe me."

It was rather a strange thing to cause terror to a man who was known to be a horse-thief.

It was nothing more or less than the sleek, soft coat of Josh White's horse—the horse claimed by Gila Jim when he was first introduced to the reader.

"Whoa! old fellow! Whoa!" said Gila Jim, as he patted the gentle animal on the neck.

The horse bent his head to receive the caress, for Gila Jim understood horses, and he was one of those men to whom they take an instinctive liking.

He stood with his hand on the horse's neck for at least a minute, trying to decide on his next move.

Then he apparently made up his mind.

"I'll do it. It's the best thing in the world to trust to. Just give a horse his head and he will be sure to lead you out of any snarl, if there is a way out of it at all."

He placed his foot in the stirrup, and in a second was astride of Josh White's horse.

"Only one more if I'm caught," he thought. "They will string me up anyhow, and I ain't going to let a little thing like a horse stand in my way. Get up!"

He gave the horse a smart tap to start him, and then let him go his own way.

In a few minutes he found himself at the end of the corridor, where the solid rocks that

guarded the exit were apparently as immovable as the earth itself.

"This as far as you go? Well, now, what are we going to do? Can't you find your way out?" said Gila Jim, addressing the horse in a musing way.

He dismounted and felt all over the rocks.

Not a single thing to guide him to the secret of its opening.

"Surely I won't have to go back and surrender, just because I cannot find my way out. No! I'll die here first."

Gila Jim meant what he said. There could be no doubt about that.

"Ha! What's that?"

He thought he heard a noise behind him.

"No, it was imagination. I'm getting as scary as a girl. They can't get out of there until I let them out. And when I do that, I'll have enough of the gang with me to make it safe. If it wasn't for Sandy being in there, I don't know but what I'd let them all starve to death."

With this Christian reflection, Gila Jim addressed himself again to the task of trying to find the secret means of moving the rocks that kept him from the outer world.

No use! He could not find any clew to the mysterious fastening.

"Listen! Was not that a sound of some body coming along the corridor!"

His eyes, a little more accustomed to the gloom, and therefore able to distinguish something of his surroundings, were strained to make out the cause of the noise he had heard behind him.

"Sounded something like footsteps, but I don't see anybody!"

He listened again.

"Yes, I can hear them. There's no mistake about—Great heavens!"

Gila Jim grasped convulsively at the bridle of his horse and got behind it as he saw an immense shadowy form coming toward him in the gloom.

Whether man or beast he could not tell.

Its feet made very little sound as it moved leisurely along, coming straight to him.

Nearer and nearer it came, until it reached the rock that Gila Jim had been trying to move.

Gila Jim drew a sigh of relief.

"That's the second time in ten minutes that I have been scared by a horse. Well, I guess I have more excuse this time, for that brute is the biggest thing I ever saw on tour legs."

It was indeed Nebo, the giant horse, that had come down the corridor.

"Wonder what he is going to do?" thought Gila Jim, as Nebo put his head in a corner and rubbed his nose up and down the rock.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth, when there was a trembling of the massive rock, and then it swung slowly aside, and Gila Jim was free!

Repressing a whoop of delight he sprung on his own horse and dashed through the opening the giant horse keeping close by his side.

The fun was still going on in Mezuto City, but Gila Jim had no desire to participate in it just now.

He turned his back on the row of shanties forming the principal street and rode rapidly up a path that led along the side of the mountain.

His object was to reach the spot where Sandy had so dexterously cast the rope over Josh White.

"Things are getting too hot for the gang around here, and we shall have to pull up stakes for awhile," he muttered. "Besides, there is that Chicago job. I never expected to be bothered with that out here, but you never can tell when a thing is going to turn up."

He quickened the pace of his horse, and Nebo moved faster, too.

"Wish that horse would get away. I don't like him very much, any more than I do his master. I wouldn't take him as a gift. He knows too much for me."

He tried to make his own steed run away from the giant horse, but it was useless. The latter kept in the same relative position—just behind Gila Jim on his right.

"Darn you! I won't look at you. If you want to come along, come; but I won't be sociable with a horse eight or nine feet high, to please any one."

For an hour Gila Jim rode on, without turning his head, though he could hear the steady clatter of Nebo's hoofs, and knew that the giant horse was with him.

At last he turned into the gorge toward which he had been hurrying.

There was no moonlight now, as there had been the last time the reader visited the spot, but Gila Jim was evidently too much at home to want light.

He rode confidently along, with Nebo close behind him, until he reached a place where a fir tree grew with its branches drooping, so that they almost swept the ground, giving the impression that the tree had been almost uprooted at some time in its existence, but had tenaciously clung to the soil and kept itself alive by sheer pluck.

Gila Jim rode up to the tree and seizing it by the end of one of its branches, pulled it aside, disclosing a narrow path.

As soon as he had passed the tree it would have fallen back into its place had not Nebo followed Gila Jim so closely that it had not time to do so before the giant horse had also entered on the hidden path.

The trail wound deviously between huge boulders, clumps of cedars and over narrow rifts that a horse could easily clear, until it ended in a flat space, bordered by a circle of firs, planted irregularly by nature in one of her queer moods, but serving excellently the purpose of anybody who might wish to avoid observation on the plateau.

Not a soul was to be seen as Gila Jim drew up at the edge of the space.

"Where are the boys, I wonder? They will have to get out of here mighty soon, anyhow."

He could hear the breathing of the giant horse behind him, but did not take the trouble to turn his head.

"The brute is still there. If I did not think a horse better than a man I believe I would put a bullet in him when I get my pistol again," muttered Gila Jim.

He rode across the plateau and entered the thicket of firs on the other side.

"Here are signs that some of them are around," he said as he rode up to the door of a shanty so hidden by the trees that it would not be noticed by any one entering the camp from the other side. Behind it arose the mountain perpendicularly, so that it could not be surprised from the rear.

Though ostensibly the home of a party of hard-working miners, it had evidently been arranged to guard against sudden attacks.

Inside, on a rough table, were the remains of a meal, just as it had been left the night before, while around the room bunks ranged in a double row looked as if they had just been vacated.

Gila Jim got off his horse and, walking over to one of the bunks, put his hand on the gray blanket. It was warm, indicating that the bunk had lately been occupied.

"I thought so. They are here, but got scared when they heard me coming."

He put his two hands over his mouth and uttered a low and peculiar whistle.

"Guess they are within hearing of the signal," he thought. "I must see them quick. I don't know but there may be another way out of that cave, and I have no time to fool round here."

There was no answer to his whistle, and, with a gesture of impatience, he again made the signal.

"Can they have gone away altogether, after all?" he growled.

No! There was the answer.

Softly, like the timid wail of a lost spirit, came a whistle, so much like his own that it might have been an echo.

"Where the deuce are you? Come on. It is only Gila Jim. Show yourselves, can't you?"

Even as he uttered these words in a grumbling tone, there was a scuffling over his head, and a queer looking object dropped from somewhere at his very feet.

"Hallo! Queredo! Where did you come from?" asked Gila Jim.

The creature he called Queredo was a dwarf, not more than four feet high, but with a head and face of prodigious size. He was dark-skinned, with black eyes set very deeply in his head, while devilish cunning and malignity were stamped in every lineament of his repulsive countenance. He wore the blue flannel shirt and rough overalls stuffed into heavy boots of the ordinary miner, with the butt of a pistol and the handle of a bowie-knife carelessly protruding from his belt.

He pointed above him in answer to Gila Jim's question, and laughed in a noiseless way that made his countenance look more horrible than before.

"Up in the loft, were you? Where are the rest of the boys?"

Queredo pointed out of the door, then to the bunks, and then to Gila Jim.

"Got out of the way when they heard me coming, eh? Anything happened to scare them?"

The dwarf nodded violently.

"Oh, there has? What was it?"

Queredo stepped up to Gila Jim, and reaching up to his shoulder, took hold of it with his long right hand, while he grasped an imaginary person with his left, showing in pantomime that they had seen Gila Jim and Sandy in the power of the Giant Horseman.

"Well, if they saw that fellow taking us along, why didn't they give him a shot from their Winchesters?" grumbled Gila Jim.

The dwarf shook his head slowly from side to side with a knowing grin, while he held out his outspread hands deprecatingly, to indicate that they were afraid.

"Curse that big man! He seems to scare everybody. I believe he is a relation of the devil, as sure as my name is Gila Jim."

Queredo, who had been looking into Gila Jim's face during this soliloquy, now waddled toward the door, and drawing in his large cheeks whistled in the peculiar manner that was evidently the regular signal of the band.

There was no response, and Queredo was just about to whistle again, when half a dozen men stole sheepishly into the shanty and disposed themselves on the bunks around the room.

Every man carried a Winchester, as well as his revolver and knife, and it was evident that if the miners found any silver or gold in the claims, they would not be prevented from defending it from thieves by lack of weapons.

"Well, boys, we have got to make tracks," said Gila Jim.

"Guess we have," said one of the men. "What have you got hanging to your wrist?"

"A little reminder of some one that I'm going to wipe out—a Vermonter, a tenderfoot, who has led me the worst dance I ever had. Here, Queredo."

He held out his wrist to the dwarf, who, taking the dangling handcuff in his hand, examined it closely for an instant. Then he went to a chest in a corner and drew out a large bunch of keys of all sizes and patterns. Selecting one, he fitted it to the handcuff, and with a turn of his fingers unfastened it.

"Good, Queredo; you are a useful fellow, even if you ain't very ornamental," said Gila Jim.

"Now, look here, boys; Gila Jim has been insulted by this here Vermonter, and he is going to save these handcuffs until he can clap one on that fellow's hand and the other on the wrist of the big, overgrown snoozer they call the Giant Horseman. I'll do it some day, as sure as my name is Gila Jim, and when I do I'll make a target of them both for my six-shooter, at twelve paces. You hear me squeal, boys, and you all know that Gila Jim is a man who means just what he says."

His listeners nodded their heads gravely. They did know Gila Jim.

"By the way, that horse of his followed me right into camp. Some of you go out and hitch him to a tree. If we keep the horse we shall have his owner at that much disadvantage, anyhow."

Three of his companions silently obeyed Gila Jim and went out.

In less than a minute they came tumbling into the shanty again, with white faces and trembling limbs.

"What's the matter?" demanded Gila Jim, picking up a Winchester rifle from the floor, where it had been dropped by one of the party when he came in.

"Go—out—and—see!" stammered one.

With his Winchester ready for instant use, Gila Jim stepped outside the door and glanced across the plateau.

Then his face blanched, his knees tottered and he reeled back as if struck by lightning.

There was the giant horse, Nebo, walking slowly toward him, and on his back, his dark eyes flashing in the moonlight, sat the Giant Horseman.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS LAUGH!

"WHAT are we to do, Fernandez?" asked Josh White, when he realized that there was no means of opening the iron door through which Gila Jim had escaped. "Is there any other way of getting out of this place?"

"Si, señor."

"There is?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, if you ain't the coolest man I ever saw even in old Vermount," said Josh White, looking admiringly at the Giant Horseman.

"Bianca," said Fernandez, turning to his daughter.

"Yes, father."

"We will go."

"Yes, father."

The Giant Horseman seized Sandy by the arm and walked him to a corner of the cave, where a door led into a small dungeon. Here the prisoner was thrust in and the door closed with a spring lock.

Bianca disappeared for an instant, and then, returning at a signal from her father, drew a heavy curtain aside with one pull at a cord that hung unnoticed against the wall, revealing another apartment larger than the one in which they stood, and furnished in a luxurious manner suggestive of a salon in the house of a New York millionaire rather than a cave in the center of Arizona.

The walls and ceiling glistened like those of the other room, where they could be seen, but they were so hidden over three-fourths of their expanse by pictures, mirrors, and gracefully draped curtains that but little of their native beauty was visible. In one corner stood a magnificent grand piano, while elegantly-upholstered chairs and settees and carved tables and stands of costly woods were artistically disposed in studied disorder. In the center of the room was a table, on which was a snowy tablecloth and a meal set for four persons.

"We have only preserved meats, fruits, and so on," said Bianca. "We get our housekeeping necessities direct from Chicago, and live exclusively on cold viands when we are at home."

The four sat down to the table, and the three men at least ate as if they meant business. They had each passed through enough within

the past few hours to induce them to do justice to their meal.

Bianca gracefully did the honors, and gave to each a glass of pure spring water—in itself a luxury in that part of the country.

"Senor," said Fernandez, when his guests had finished their repast, "we had better be on the move."

"All right, Fernandez. I'm ready for anything in the way of fun, from serving on a jury to helping at a husking bee, as we used to say in old Vermount. Lead on."

"Come then, señor," said the Giant Horseman.

Putting his hand on a large mirror at the end of the apartment, it slid along the wall and disclosed on opening, through which the three crawled, the mirror coming back to its place as soon as they had entered.

The place in which they stood was low and narrow, so that the Giant Horseman had to stoop, as did even his companions.

"Up these steps, señor. We shall in a very short time reach a spot close to the camp of the Red Cross Gang. Then we can decide on further action."

"Well, I know what our action will be when we get within reach of Gila Jim," said Sam Horton, savagely. "He shall not escape me next time."

"No, I don't think he will, nor any of his gang," said Josh. "I'd just like to have them in old Vermount. They'd get a taste of Down-East law there."

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"What's that?" yelled Josh White. "By Heavens, I heard some one laughing in my very ear!"

It was an utterly joyless laugh, like that of a maniac, and was as ear-piercing as a locomotive whistle.

Josh White and Sam Horton both looked inquiringly into the face of the Giant Horseman.

He was evidently as much mystified as they.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Man or devil, take that!" shrieked Sam Horton, as he fired two bullets in quick succession into the gloom above them.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Fernandez, this beats anything I ever heard in old Vermount. Don't you know what it is that is taking liberties in your private establishment? If I were you I'd make him jump this claim so quick that—"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Lead on, Fernandez. We must find out who this fellow is, and why he is enjoying himself so much. If I don't make him laugh on the other side of his mouth when I get a clutch on him, then my name isn't Josh White, of old Vermount."

The Giant Horseman gravely bowed his head, and holding the torch on high, marched up the steps that wound this way and that, closely followed by Josh White and the young cowboy, Sam Horton.

The Giant Horseman did not deign to draw the pistols that hung in his belt, but Josh White and Sam Horton held their weapons ready for instant use.

Brave men as they were, there was something so supernatural about the sound of the mysterious laugh, they did not feel comfortable save with pistols in their hands.

Suddenly the stairs came to an end.

A long corridor faced them.

"At the end of this passage we shall find a way out," said the Giant Horseman.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

"Gol darn that thing. I'd give fifty dollars to put a leaden gag in that big mouth, wherever it is," said Josh.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh seemed to shriek now.

"By heavens! Fernandez, I will find out what that is," yelled Josh White, as, six-shooter in hand, he sprang forward.

As he did so, he stumbled against the Giant Horseman, throwing the torch from his hand, and they were all in pitch darkness.

"Gewhillikins! Now I have done it. Can we find our way out without the torch?"

"Si, señor," was the Giant Horseman's quiet reply. "Walk straight on after me."

"Go ahead. We are coming."

The Giant Horseman strode forward for about twenty paces, with his two companions close behind him.

"Are we nearly there, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

As he spoke there was a glimmer of light over his head, and he pushed open a trap that led into the outer air.

The Giant Horseman could reach it from the ground, but there was a flight of steps leading to it by which egress was to be obtained.

This was the other means of reaching the outer world from his secret habitation to which he had referred.

"This is a lonesome sort of place," said Josh White, as he and the cowboy stood by the side of the Giant Horseman on a narrow path running around the mountain, that towered a thousand feet above them, while below they could look only into unfathomable depths of gloom.

The moon was rapidly sinking, and in a few

minutes more would be quite out of sight beyond the angry bluff that overhung them so threateningly.

"Now which way, Fernandez?"

For answer the Giant Horseman motioned to them to follow him.

He walked swiftly along the narrow path for a few yards, then there was a sharp turn, and they saw before them a large, flat space, with a miniature forest beyond.

"There," said the Giant Horseman, briefly, pointing to the trees.

"Gila Jim?" asked Josh White.

"Is he there?" eagerly demanded Sam Horton, as he grasped more firmly the revolver he carried in his big hand.

The Giant Horseman again gravely bowed his head.

Then he started, as his flashing dark eyes distinguished a familiar object in the gloom.

"Nebo!"

There was a sound of hoofs, a subdued exclamation of delight from Fernandez, and the giant horse and rider were once more together.

Seeing in the presence of Nebo a sure sign that Gila Jim was not far away, Josh White and Sam Horton ran forward, their weapons in their hands.

An exclamation from Josh White, another from Sam Horton, and both were floundering in a small stream that generally ran silently down the mountains, but that had now been swollen by the melting of the mountain snows to araging torrent.

As the two men were swept resistlessly away from the spot where the Giant Horseman saw their danger, but was unable to give them assistance, the mocking laughter rung out once more like the echo of a demon's mirth:

"Ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER VI.

A ONE-SIDED BATTLE.

"GEEWHILLIKENS!" spluttered Josh White, as he and Sam Horton landed, breathless and bruised, in a fir-tree a few hundred yards down the mountain-side. "If I ever get back to old Vermount alive, I shall have a story to tell. How do you feel, Sam?"

"Curse the luck! Shall we ever get within sight of that villain again?" said Sam Horton, as he followed Josh White to a more secure footing, while the stream on which they had sailed so nearly to death went tumbling over a precipice with a roar that made him shudder.

"Meaning Gila Jim! Of course we shall get within sight of him. He is not far off."

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Even now the mysterious laugh was tormenting them.

The dawn was just breaking and the as yet invisible sun was warming the clouds in the east enough to cast a slight reflection over the spot where they stood.

Josh White glanced hurriedly around, and then, with a yell of vengeance bounded up the mountain-side to where something moving in a clump of cedars had caught his eye.

"Come out of this," he yelled to the mysterious something.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Sam Horton had by this time joined the Vermonter, who was staring into the clump of cedars with an expression of astonishment that was three-fourths supernatural horror.

"Sam, I saw him."

"What?"

"The thing that laughed."

"What was it like?"

"It had a large face!"

"A man's face?"

"Yes—and no. I never saw a man's face like it, before."

"Where did you see it?"

"Among these cedars."

"Then it must be there now."

"No. It vanished before my very eyes."

"Pshaw, Josh; I never saw you so scared before. I thought they raised brave men in old Vermount."

"I ain't afraid of anything human, but when it comes to the devil and his pals, I ain't there worth a cent," said Josh White, nervously clutching the butt of one of his silver-mounted six-shooters that still showed in his belt.

The two men examined carefully every foot of ground in and around the clump of trees without result, but had they displaced a seemingly immovable rock just above the clump of cedars, they would have found, seated under it, in a small cave, to which the rock formed a door, the creature that had startled them so many times with its weird sounds of mirth, watching their every movement.

Queredo, the dwarf!

The two men walked quickly up the mountain by the side of the torrent that had brought them down so unceremoniously.

Hardly were their backs turned, when Queredo ran out of his hiding-place, and by secret paths known only to himself, reached the shanty in the camp of the Red Cross Gang before the Vermonter and cowboy had well commenced their journey back to the spot where they had left the Giant Horseman.

As soon as the dwarf got back into the shanty he secreted himself in the small space between the sloping roof and the ceiling of the room, so that he might have the pleasure of dropping unexpectedly on Gila Jim.

"Where is Fernandez, I wonder," said Josh White, when at length the two reached the place where they had been so unceremoniously carried by the stream away from the Giant Horseman.

"Guess he has gone on. He never expected to see us again, of course," said Sam Horton, "and I'm a fish if I can understand how we ever got out of that water alive."

"Say, Sam, what is that over in the trees yonder?" asked Josh, suddenly, pointing to the small thicket of pines that hid the camp of the Red Cross Gang.

"What did it look like?"

"Thought I saw something shining like the barrel of a rifle."

"Whereabouts?"

"Just over there to the right. Yes, by Caesar, it is, too. There's something going on."

The two men examined their pistols.

"Guess there is nothing the matter with them, eh, Sam? The water hasn't hurt mine anyhow," remarked Josh White, as he held one of his silver-mounted six-shooters in each hand.

"Mine are all right," said the cowboy, briefly, as he looked with contracted brows in the direction of the shining object among the trees.

"Look, Sam! What is that over there, to the left?"

"More rifles, by heavens!"

"That's what it is. Hurry, Sam. We are wanted as sure as shooting!"

The two dashed across the open space that separated them from the thicket.

They knew that there were enemies among the trees, and that the enemies had the advantage of cover, while they were absolutely unprotected, and made a good target for the terrible repeating-rifles that they could just see glistening among the tree-trunks and shadowy foliage.

Bang! bang! rung out two shots, and a hole was bored through Sam Horton's broad-leaved sombrero, while Josh White felt the wind of a bullet very close to his cheek.

"Take that, gol darn you, in memory of old Vermount!" cried Josh, as he leveled the pistol in his right hand and fired in the direction of the half-hidden rifles on the right.

As the report died away, he heard a sound that made him start back involuntarily, and caused Sam Horton's eyes to open in horrified astonishment.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The mocking laugh that had been pursuing them ever since the escape of Gila Jim!

"Come on, Sam. We'll find out who it is this time, sure!"

"I'm with you," was the response of the cowboy, as the two gained the thicket.

"Come, quick!" yelled Josh.

Only just in time!

The two had hardly got behind the trunk of two large cedars, fortunately within easy reach, when a fusilade rung out from both sides that gave evidence of a band of determined as well as thoroughly-armed men being in the vicinity.

"Gosh, Sam! This is a warm shop! Never saw anything like it in old Vermount. We'd better get out of this somehow, and right quick, if we are ever going to have a chance at Gila Jim."

"That's all right, but how?"

"Whew!" was Josh White's only response, as a shower of chips flew from the bark of the tree he was hugging in a most affectionate manner.

The enemy had rifles, and the pistols of Josh and the cowboy were of no more use in the affray than so many corncobs.

Not a soul could be seen nor a sound heard save the vicious cracking of the rifles whose barrels were protruding through the thick underbrush just out of the range of their revolvers.

"There are more on the right than on the left, Sam," remarked Josh, after about five minutes of the shooting.

"That's what."

"How many are there on the left, do you think?"

"Just one," was Sam Horton's confident reply.

"Think so?"

"I know so."

"He shoots mighty fast, then."

"He does shoot fast."

"Ha! ha! ha!" came from the spot they were talking about.

"Curse him!" growled Josh White. "I should like to have that fellow under the pump at Stumps Center, in old Vermount, for five minutes. There would be more satisfaction in that than in shooting him, by a darned sight."

"Let's make a dash for him," suggested Sam Horton. "I'm tired of this."

"And get all plowed up by the other party. There would be no use in that."

"Josh."

"Well."

"Did you ever fight Indians?"

"Yes. I have been in two or three Apache scrimmages."

"Very well, then, just imagine that Gila Jim and his gang are Indians."

"I can easily do that. They are about as mean as any red-skins I ever had to deal with."

"Durn that fellow. He has clipped a piece out of the rim of my hat," said Sam, as a bullet flattened itself against the trunk of a tree between himself and Josh White.

"What is your plan?" asked Josh.

"To drop down and get nearer to that fellow who has been laughing at us all night."

"Well?"

"If we can get near enough to use our pops we shall stand some show. We can't stay here all day. They will get clear around us after awhile, and then we shall be gone up, sure."

He dropped flat on his stomach as he spoke, and had dragged himself several yards and got cover behind another tree before the main party of the enemy on the right saw through the maneuver.

Then there was a volley, but it did no harm.

Before the smoke had cleared away, Josh had followed his comrade's example, and had also reached another tree, further along than Sam.

It must be remembered that the enemy on both sides were some distance in front as well as opposite, so that Josh and Sam were able to stand behind the trees in such a position as not to expose themselves on one side while seeking protection on the other.

Nearly half an hour had elapsed, when at last they stood safely concealed from the gang peering away at them on the right, and within, perhaps, twenty yards of the thick clump of trees from which the solitary marksman with the irritating laugh had been paying his respects.

"He's stopped firing, Sam. Seems to me we haven't had anything from him since we commenced to move in his direction."

"Didn't you say you have fought Indians?" asked Sam Horton quietly.

"Yes."

"What has your experience taught you?"

Josh White looked curiously at the cowboy for a few seconds. Then he broke into a smile.

"You are right, Sam. Of course it does."

"What?"

"Why, silence means treachery, every time."

"With Indian or white man, when fighting from cover," acquiesced Sam Horton.

The two men were hugging their protecting trees closely, and the firing having ceased from every direction, the scene was a very still and peaceful one.

Suddenly, with a quick cry, Sam Horton sprung over to Josh White and pulled him aside just as a bullet crashed against the tree in the very spot hidden by the Vermonter's head a second before.

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Queredo's large head was bobbing about delightedly as the dwarf covered Josh White and Sam Horton alternately, and nodded to them in an unmistakable manner to throw up their hands.

CHAPTER VII.

A SLIPPERY CUSTOMER.

The appearance of Queredo was so sudden and unexpected that Josh White and Sam Horton could only stand and stare at the queer-looking dwarf without movement.

Then Queredo with a savage glance along the barrel of his loaded Winchester, seemed to be making such earnest preparations to shoot that the two men quickly raised their hands, pistols and all, in token of surrender.

Queredo came to within a few yards of them, and motioned to them to drop their pistols from their hands.

"You've got a good deal of cold cheek," said Josh. "This is a favorite revolver of mine and I do hate to let it fall on the damp grass."

For answer Queredo pulled the trigger of his rifle with a murderous frown, in marked contrast with his usual sarcastic smile.

There was a ringing report and a crash an inch or two above Josh White's head.

The shot had struck the tree just behind the Vermonter.

Josh White dropped his silver-mounted six-shooter without another objection.

"Of course, when you put it that way, Mr. Shorty, I have nothing more to say," he observed, with a comical grin.

Then Sam Horton, with a very disgusted expression, let his weapons fall to the ground.

Queredo, with his rifle resting in the hollow of his left arm ready for instant action, stood looking in their faces as if curious to know what they thought of the situation.

The firing from the other part of the thicket had ceased entirely.

"Who are you, sonny?" asked Josh, when the dwarf's steady gaze had become somewhat embarrassing.

Queredo elevated his eyebrows and brought the muzzle of his rifle in a line with Josh's head, but vouchsafed no other answer.

"Oh, all right. If you take offense at a simple question, that lets me out but I feel very much like a fool, standing here with my paws in the air, like a bad boy in a country school. What do you say, Sam?"

The Giant Horseman.

"It isn't safe to say anything now, I guess," returned the cowboy, gritting his teeth.

Queredo nodded approval of this last speech with his large head.

Then he dropped on the ground in a sitting posture and with his rifle still ready to send a bullet through the head of the first man that moved, hugged his knees in the enjoyment of his triumph.

"Wonder how long this is to last, Sam?" growled Josh White.

The dwarf's eyes glittered as he heard the impatient question.

Sam Horton did not answer his companion. His eyes were set as he looked straight before him, over Queredo's head, as if in deep thought.

Strangely enough, Josh White's eyes took the same expression, and he did not repeat the question.

Then the gun was suddenly wrenched from Queredo's grasp, while a mighty hand was placed on his head and crushed him to the earth.

At the same instant Josh White and Sam Horton dropped their hands from their constrained positions and rushed forward to wreak their vengeance on the struggling dwarf.

"Fernandez!" cried Josh, joyfully.

"Si, señor," was the quiet response.

The Giant Horseman was bending over Queredo, holding him with his face on the ground, as helpless as a crushed worm. Then he gave the peculiar whistle that always drew Nebo to his side, and the noble animal emerged from his concealment behind a clump of large cedars and put his velvet nose lovingly on his master's shoulder.

"What are you going to do with this thing?" asked Josh, pointing to the writhing dwarf.

For answer the Giant Horseman grasped Queredo by the shoulders, and without effort lifted him to the saddle of Nebo.

The dwarf looked so diminutive on the back of the immense horse that Josh White burst out laughing.

Queredo, held firmly by the steel-like grip of the Giant Horseman's powerful hands, could only scowl the resentment he was powerless to show in any tangible manner.

"Let's hear you laugh again, just once," said Josh White.

"Yes, let out a snicker," added Sam Horton.

Queredo would have killed them both with a look if he could.

Even the Giant Horseman's iron features relaxed into a smile.

He enjoyed Queredo's mortification in his quiet way as much as did his two companions.

"We have the Red Cross Gang at bay, señor," said Fernandez.

Queredo turned his eyes quickly on the Giant Horseman.

"Have we, Fernandez? Glad to hear you say so. But it seemed to me as if they had us in a hole. Where are they?"

The Giant Horseman pointed across to the spot from whence the firing had proceeded a short time ago.

"Let us get over there," said Sam. "I won't sleep until I have Gila Jim again where I can make terms with him."

"I think we have the gang pretty safe in the ranch," remarked the Giant Horseman. "They will hardly dare to break camp now, in broad daylight, after there has been so much stir."

"Don't know about that," responded Josh White. "Gila Jim is a slick one, and as game as a grizzly. I wouldn't be surprised at his making a break for the plains at any moment."

"Let us follow it up and see," said Fernandez.

"But we shall make a very good mark for those skulking varmints if they are there, as soon as we get out from these trees. Don't you see that, Fernandez?"

"They are not as near as that."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was among them just before I came to you, and saw them moving quietly toward the ranch," said the Giant Horseman, with a smile.

"You were among them?" yelled Josh White.

"Yes."

"And didn't you get a chance to draw a bead on Gila Jim?" asked Sam Horton.

"Twenty chances."

"And you didn't do it?"

"Certain y not."

"Wish I'd been there," said Josh, earnestly.

"I'd 'a' bored him so quick his corpse would have looked like a corn-cob," added Sam.

"What good would it have done?" asked Fernandez, quietly.

"We should have known that he was out of the way, that's all," said Sam.

"And the information you want would have died with him."

"Whew!" whistled Josh.

At the reference to information from Gila Jim, Queredo had become deeply interested in the conversation, while the Satanic grin on his countenance became more marked.

"Drive ahead, Fernandez," said Josh.

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman directed his two companions to the wall behind him in single file,

while he in turn followed Nebo, with the dwarf perched on his back.

"If you attempt treachery I will kill you," said Fernandez to the dwarf, as he pointed his "Colt's six" at Queredo's big head.

The procession moved rapidly through the trees until a slight odor of burning pine wood could be detected.

A low-spoken word by Fernandez, and Nebo stopped, the dwarf looking back curiously.

"Getting close, eh, Fernandez?" said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"Where is the ranch?"

"Just past that clump of cedars."

"Ain't we within range?"

"Not yet. The gang are in the house," returned the Giant Horseman.

The dwarf was listening to every word.

"What is the plan?" asked Sam Horton.

"Ask Fernandez?" said Josh White.

Thus appealed to, the Giant Horseman answered in a practical way.

Unceremoniously seizing Queredo by the nape of the neck, he lifted the little rascal from Nebo's back and held him out at arm's length.

"What are you going to do with him, Fernandez?" asked Josh White. "Tie him?"

"Si, señor."

"Good idea, too," put in Sam Horton. "Only one thing better, and that would be to shoot him."

"But what are you going to do about rope, Fernandez? We must have something to put around him. I guess you forgot it, didn't you?" said Josh.

"No, señor."

The Giant Horseman drew from one of his capacious pockets a small coil of copper wire, and his two companions looked significantly at each other.

Leisurely depositing the dwarf on the ground and holding him down with one foot, Fernandez dexterously passed the wire around the dwarf's arms and fastened it behind him. The same was done with his legs, and Queredo was helpless.

The beauty of the arrangement was apparent at once. The dwarf might have wriggled out of a rope, but this copper wire would cut into his flesh if he attempted to struggle.

Leaving the dwarf lying where he had been dropped, the three, with Nebo in their midst, made their way cautiously along to where the lurking foe was known to be.

"There it is," whispered Josh, as he caught sight of a corner of the rough log-cabin.

"Nebo, stay!" said Fernandez, and the noble brute stood still at once.

The men then resorted to Indian tactics, each making his way nearer and nearer to the ranch by stepping from one tree to another and always keeping covered from those concealed in the building.

At last they were within a few yards of the ranch.

"They are keeping well hidden, Sam, eh?" said Josh.

"Do you think they are there at all?" was Sam's response.

"Oh, they are there!" returned Josh, confidently. "But they are too cute to show themselves just to give us a chance to pop at them. You know it wouldn't be reason for them to do it now, would it, Sam?"

Meanwhile, Fernandez had been earnestly gazing at the ranch between the branches of a cedar, whose trunk concealed him. He was so tall that his face reached to a space where the enemy would never have thought of looking for it.

The Giant Horseman was evidently puzzled.

Then he resorted to an old ruse in Indian warfare.

He put his hat on the end of his bowie-knife, and let it pass slowly into view of the house, round the trunk of the tree.

But the enemy did not take any notice of the hat.

"Josh!"

"Well, Sam?"

"I'm going to do it."

"What?"

"Give them a chance at me."

"Don't be a fool!"

Sam did not reply to this polite admonition, but stepping out from his tree with a revolver in each hand, ran to the shanty and in at the open doorway, Fernandez and Josh close behind.

One look around the room, with its bunks stripped of their gray blankets and the table with its scraps of bread still upon it, showed that the apartment was empty.

"Where are they?" ejaculated Sam, looking blankly into the faces of his companions.

A volley of bullets rattled through the window at the rear of the shanty, but without damage to the Giant Horseman and his companions.

"That's where they are," said Josh White, with a quiet grin.

The rough-hewn walls of the shanty were pierced with loop-holes on all sides, and the three occupants each put their eyes to as many holes in the rear wall.

"Geewhillikens!" said Josh, as he started back from the hole in amazement.

"Curse him!" yelled Sam, as he also saw what had excited Josh White.

The Giant Horseman only frowned and clinched his mighty right hand. His wrath was too deep for expression.

On the other side of the chasm that yawned at the rear of the house were Gila Jim, on Josh White's horse, surrounded by six of the Red Cross Band, all mounted and covering the shanty with their Winchesters. Crossing the terrible gulch—a thousand feet deep and about ten wide—on a square log, laid across for a bridge, was Nebo, while on his back sat the grinning dwarf, Queredo.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE TABLES WERE TURNED.

"FOOLED again, Fernandez!" said Josh White, with a shrug of his shoulders, as Nebo, having reached the other side of the chasm, Gila Jim and one of his gang proceeded to throw the end of the log from the bank and sent it tumbling to the rocky bed of the stream that ran along the bottom of the gulch.

"Si, señor."

"How did that imp manage to get those wires loose, is what I want to know?" said Sam.

"We can't get across to them now that they have taken away the bridge, even if we wanted to walk over in the face of eight Winchesters," remarked Josh White.

"Which we don't," said Sam.

"If I only had that horse of mine," wailed Josh White.

"We will go back to the cave, señor, and catch Gila Jim anon," said Fernandez.

"Just as you like," returned Josh White. "I suppose you can give us a shake-down there, eh, Fernandez? A few hours' sleep won't hurt any of us, I'm thinking."

They stepped outside the door, where the house protected them from the rifles of the Red Cross Band across the gulch, and the Giant Horseman whistled with the peculiar intonation referred to before.

His two companions did not notice any effect from the whistle.

It had an effect, however.

Queredo, the dwarf, who was riding along on Nebo with Gila Jim and his band, away from the gulch, suddenly found his horse unmanageable.

Nebo planted his four feet firmly on the ground, and then, "bucking" with all the vigor of any untamed broncho, shot Queredo far over his head, squarely into Gila Jim's back, and thence to the ground.

Nebo stood for a moment, and looked around him, as if in uncertainty.

Then his quick ears again caught the sounds of the whistle he knew so well, and he turned toward the gulch from which he had just canted away.

Another whistle!

His master was calling him!

That was enough!

Nebo trotted to the edge of the chasm and stopped.

Then he ran back a few yards, and, gathering himself for a mighty effort returned at full gallop, and cleared the space at a bound!

The next minute he was pushing his nose against his master's chest, and receiving the caresses that the Giant Horseman always had ready for his four-footed friend.

Man and horse were together again, and each gained added courage from the other's presence.

"Señor, shall we go home?" asked the Giant Horseman.

"H me! I wish I was home in old Vermount," said Josh White, mournfully. "What do you call home, Fernandez?"

"The señor's home is where Fernandez lives," was the quiet response, given with true Spanish courtesy and hospitality.

"But—Gila Jim! When shall we catch up with that scoundrel?" asked Sam Horton, impatiently.

"All in good time, Sam, my boy. There is a day of reckoning not far away, but it is no use trying to pick apples before you have planted the tree, as we used to say in old Vermount," was Josh White's reply.

"Say, Josh, what's that?" suddenly whispered Sam Horton as he pointed into the distance, where in an accidental opening in the trees allowed them to see a slight rising in the ground several hundred yards away.

"What did you think it was?" asked Josh.

Before the cowboy could answer there was a puff of smoke from the spot, and a rifle bullet whistled over the head of the Giant Horseman.

Then another puff of smoke came from among the trees at the side of the rising ground and a man jumped up from behind it with a howl of pain and rage.

The next instant a female figure, clad in a riding habit and with a large hat surmounting a wealth of dark hair, stepped out from the trees and covered the man with a six-shooter.

"Bianca!" said the Giant Horseman, as he

threw himself into his saddle and dashed toward the spot.

"Sandy!" yelled Josh White, as he followed Fernandez.

The cowboy did not say anything, but the rich blood gathered in his swarthy cheek as he saw the brave spirit she had inherited from her father displayed by the lovely girl who already had made sad havoc with his heart.

Sandy—for he it was, though how he had managed to escape from the dungeon in Fernandez's cave yet remains to be told—looked around like a hunted wolf but could see no outlet of escape.

Before him stood the determined girl, with the muzzles of her richly-mounted but deadly revolver pointed at his head, while bounding toward him from the rear was the Giant Horseman, with his two companions close on his heels.

Another stride, and Nebo bore his rider to the side of the desperado.

"Throw up your hands," said Fernandez, briefly.

Sandy sullenly let his rifle fall and did as he was commanded.

Bianca walked forward, still covering Sandy with her six-shooter, just as Josh White clapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"What business have you walking around out-doors? You should have stayed where you were put, then you wouldn't have been so likely to get sun-burned," said Josh White, as he swung Sandy around and motioned him to march on.

"What does this all mean, daughter?" asked the Giant Horseman, as he assisted her to his own saddle on Nebo's back, and walked quietly along by her side.

Sam Horton, with the admiration of all cowboys for good equestrianism, thought Bianca more attractive than ever as she spoke softly to Nebo and guided him without even touching the rein.

"Get along there, Sandy," said Josh White. "Don't loaf. That's a thing we never allow in old Vermount, and I don't like to see it here."

The desperado, with lowering looks, marched ahead, with his handcuffed wrists held before his eyes, as if in deep thought.

He was thinking, too, but was at the same time wide awake to everything transpiring around him.

How to get out of his handcuffs!

He could not slip them, for his great, ungainly hands could not pass through unless the handcuffs were opened to their fullest capacity.

Suddenly his eyes lighted up. He saw that he could get free from at least one of his manacles.

The handcuffs were old ones, and were so much worn that they did not catch when put on, but slipped open with a slight pressure.

The journey back to the secret entrance of the cave did not seem so long as when they were coming away from it, and it was not long before they reached the place where the opening that led down the steps was reached.

"I will open the trap," said Fernandez, walking in front of Sandy.

It will be remembered that the entrance to the cave was on a narrow path running around the face of the mountain.

They had been moving almost in a circle since leaving the shanty, and were in fact very near it, but separated by the deep gorge across which Nebo had leaped, and were also a thousand feet lower down.

Fernandez lifted the trap, which was a heavy flat stone, rough-hewn on the outside, and giving no indication that it concealed a hollow underneath.

"Ready, Fernandez?" asked Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"Come on, Sandy."

"Ladies first," said Sandy, gruffly.

Bianca laughed, as she sprung from the back of Nebo and ran lightly down the steps.

"Now, Sandy, the lady has gone first. Guess you had better be next."

Sandy made a movement toward the steps, down which Fernandez and Bianca had gone so low that their heads were below the level of the ground.

"Hurry up, Sandy," said Josh.

The red-whiskered ruffian looked malevolently at the cowboy and Josh White; then, with a compound movement, he threw his handcuffs over the precipice, and stooping down, overturned both the Vermonter and cowboy headlong down the steps, and closed the heavy stone trap with a bang.

A loud laugh sounded above his head, as a heavy boulder rolled down on the trap, while on the top stood the misshapen form of Queredo, the dwarf.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW SANDY GOT OUT OF THE CAVE.

WE must go back a little to explain how Bianca and Sandy were met in the forest when both were supposed to be in the secret home of the Giant Horseman.

As soon as the large mirror that formed the doorway to the hidden stairway had slid back into its place, shutting off her father and his

two companions, Bianca turned to her domestic arrangements.

Neat and deft in everything, a comparatively short time was sufficient for the young girl to remove all traces of the late meal.

Then she walked to the grand piano, threw open the lid and commenced to play.

She was a perfect musician, and as her white fingers caressed the keys she drew forth soft, dreamy music that seemed to have an indescribably soothing effect upon her.

Then her mood changed, and she played loud, brilliant pieces that filled the glittering cave with crashing chords and rapid roulades.

She was completely absorbed in her music and could not bear anything else.

It might have been better if she could.

She was in danger!

The music prevented her hearing a slight metallic noise that would have awakened her suspicions in an instant.

She had completely forgotten the presence of Sandy in his dungeon, not a dozen yards from her.

She knew the door was a strong one, and that her father was satisfied of its security.

Nothing human could break down that mighty iron door.

But what strength could not accomplish might yet be done by ingenuity.

The metallic clicking continued.

It came from the dungeon in which Sandy was confined.

There was a small opening in the iron door through which the inmate could see the outer room.

Sandy was closely watching Bianca, while he kept working at the bolt of his cell.

Fernandez had disarmed him when he thrust him into the cell, but he had not searched him carefully enough.

In an inner pocket in his heavy blue shirt Sandy carried a large bowie-knife that he never used save when he was in some desperate strait such as the present.

This knife he was now using to accomplish his delivery from his prison.

Bianca played on, while her thoughts kept pace with her active fingers.

Click, click, click, sounded Sandy's knife at the bolt!

"If she will only keep on playing I'll soon be out of this," thought Sandy.

He gave a desperate push with his knife.

The bolt moved a little.

Another push!

The door was open.

Still Bianca sat at the piano, unaware of what was going on behind her.

Sandy, grasping his knife firmly in his hand, moved cautiously across the floor in the direction of the big mirror which hid the secret outlet through which Fernandez and his friends had disappeared.

Sandy had seen it from the opening in his dungeon door and purposed to escape that way.

The mirror was at the right hand of Bianca as she sat at the piano.

Slowly and softly Sandy sneaked toward it.

Bianca still played.

At last he stood close behind her, holding his breath for fear she might hear him.

The girl ceased playing and dropped her face wistfully into her two hands.

Sandy clutched his knife tighter.

"Oh dear, it is a little lonesome here. I have a good mind to saddle Snowdrop and take a gallop over the prairie," said Bianca aloud.

She dropped her hands on the piano again and played softly.

Sandy nodded his head in a satisfied way, and again looked toward the mirror.

The girl was evidently absorbed in her piano still.

"Good job for her she didn't know I was behind her," thought Sandy, "because if I had seen a suspicious movement, I would have put my knife right between her shoulders. It would have been a pity, too. I should experience great combustion if I was to cause the untimely decease of a girl."

Sandy's love for big expressions could not be restrained even when he was in deadly peril.

He moved away from Bianca and looked around to see just which way he should proceed.

"Stop!"

Clear and distinct rung out the command through the vaulted room.

Sandy started and—stood still.

"Drop that knife!"

Sandy let his knife fall to the ground.

"Get back to your cell!"

"Suppose I don't?"

"Then I will kill you!"

"Honest?"

"What do you think?"

"Yes; I guess you mean business."

"I do."

Like a tigress, Bianca's dark eyes were flashing on the desperado, as she sat, with her two pearl-handled pistols pointed at his head.

When she was sitting with her face in her hands a few minutes before, she was watching Sandy in the big mirror.

As soon as he turned his head she saw her chance, swung around on the piano-stool, and

covered him with the pistols that were ready to her hand in her belt.

He looked at her when he reached the door of her dungeon, but she was watching his every movement with unabated vigilance, and the pretty pearl-handled revolvers looked wicked as they were tightly clinched in her small, white hands.

As soon as he was fairly inside the dungeon she stepped forward and shot the bolt.

"Guess you have me safe again," said Sandy, with a sullen smile.

"I think I have," replied Bianca, carelessly, as she replaced the pistols in her belt and turned away.

"You think you have, eh?" muttered Sandy. "We shall see."

He waited until she had again taken her place at the piano-stool, and then coolly pushed his cell door open.

When Bianca shot the bolt she did not look closely to see that it really went into its socket. Sandy had kept his foot against the door and the bolt, went outside and did not fasten the door at all.

With one bound he reached his knife, which Bianca had neglected to pick up.

Another movement took him to the mirror.

He was making a desperate break for liberty, and he realized that his only chance was to act quickly.

Bianca would be sure to discover him anyhow, and he did not take as many precautions to avoid attracting her attention as before.

Strangely enough she did not seem to be aware of his escape.

The mirror! How was he to move it? Where was the secret spring?

"Ha! Here it was!

One touch and the mirror slid aside, revealing the opening that led to liberty.

Sandy could not repress a chuckle of triumph as he stepped through the opening.

The chuckle nearly cost him his life.

"Bang! Bang!"

Bianca was on her feet, and two bullets from her revolvers flattened themselves on the rocky wall of the secret corridor within an inch of Sandy's head, as he dashed up the stairs.

Headlong he went, going around a turn in the stairs just as Bianca reached the entrance.

In passing through she accidentally touched the spring that released the mirror, and it swung into place again, leaving the corridor in inky darkness.

"Never mind," she thought. "I know these stairs well, and he has no gun."

"Surrender, or I will shoot you dead!" she cried.

No answer.

"You cannot get out, and you may as well come back at once, and save us both trouble," she said impatiently, as she fired two more shots into the darkness.

Sandy did not make the least sign even now, though the corridor was full of smoke from the pistols, while the echoes of the reports grumbled through the vast space until it seemed as if they would never be silent.

Bianca had reached the turn in the stairs referred to above, and when she fired had directed her aim straight ahead.

"I do not see how I could have missed him," she thought. "Perhaps I killed him and he dropped without even a groan."

Then, quick as a flash she felt a hand on her throat, as both her pistols were dexterously knocked from her grasp.

"Now, my girl, I have you!" hissed Sandy's voice in her ear.

Bianca struggled desperately, but she was no match for her assailant.

"Ah, tug away as hard as you like, my little beauty. But I have roped cattle too long to be knocked out by a girl."

"Coward!" gasped Bianca.

"What's that word again?" asked Sandy, sarcastically. "You are rather too abstruse for my understanding."

"If I could only reach my pistols—"

"Precisely. If you only could. But you can't. And I have my toothpick ready for use.

"Are you going to murder me?"

"No. I only want you to procrastinate your intention of holding me back from the society of my friends on the surface of this hemisphere. That's all."

"I suppose that jargon means that you want to escape," said Bianca scornfully.

"Jargon! Well now, I really must expostulate. As for escaping—why, I have already escaped. I have you by the throat, and I can dictate terms to you."

He forced the girl down the stairs, to the spot where he knew the opening to the room they had just left must be.

"Open that door!" he commanded.

Bianca was willing that he should go back into the room, hoping that in some way she would yet be able to foil him. So she touched the secret spring, and the mirror slid aside.

"Now, my girl, I'll let you take a rest in this comfortable little room. Allow me to lead you to your boudoir."

As he spoke, he forced Bianca across the room

and into the dungeon he had so lately tenanted, and bolted the door.

"It is fastened this time," he said, with an evil grin, as he examined the bolt to make quite sure that it fitted into its socket. "I guess you will have to stay there for a few hours—perhaps a few days."

He looked around the room, as if searching for something.

"Ah! Here is what I want," he said, as he took a Winchester repeating-rifle from a recess and fastened on a cartridge-belt, fully supplied with ammunition, which he found with the rifle. "Guess I'll go, now. Farewell, my own true love—farewell. I kiss my hand to you, fair damsel."

He was just passing out through the opening into the secret corridor, when he stopped suddenly, as if he had just thought of something.

"Say, you!" he growled, looking toward the dungeon where Bianca was watching him by means of a hole in the iron door.

"What do you want?"

"You may be in there some little time, and I don't want you to starve. I'll give you something to eat and drink."

He brought two loaves of bread and a pitcher of water from the spring and put them in the cell, the door of which he opened a little way to admit them, carefully bolting it again afterward.

"Good-by! You may as well tackle your grub, for you are sure to stay there all day anyhow."

Throwing his rifle across his arm, he favored Bianca with one more triumphant grin, and taking one of the torches that lighted up the apartment, disappeared through the opening into the corridor and then ran quickly up the stairs.

"I shall be here all day, shall I?" said Bianca to herself, as soon as she was alone. "I do not think so."

Going to a corner of the cell opposite the door, she easily displaced a small stone in the floor that could not be seen at all in the gloom, and that did not look as if it could be moved, even if a light had been brought to the spot.

Bianca, however, knew all the secrets of her father's subterranean fortress.

Under the stone was an iron ring.

Bianca grasped the ring and pulled it with all her strength.

It was rusty, and gave forth a harsh, grating sound as it came up, and showed that it was the extremity of an iron rod.

What was the effect of pulling up this iron rod?

As the rod came up out of the floor, the bolt of the iron door slowly ran back and the door opened!

Bianca pushed back the rod, replaced the stone and walked out of the dungeon.

"We do not make traps in which we ourselves can be caught, Mr. Sandy," said Bianca. "Now to follow you! Father left you in my charge, and I will try to show him that his confidence was not misplaced."

Sandy had a good start of her and was probably by this time in the open air.

She ran up the stairs to the spot where she had dropped her pistols.

They were still lying on the ground. Sandy had overlooked them.

Placing them in her belt, she continued her pursuit.

The trap leading into the air was open. Sandy had found his way out.

Bianca knew that Sandy would make for the forest, where the shanty that was the headquarters of the Red Cross Band was hidden, and bent her own steps cautiously in that direction.

"There he is, by heavens!" she whispered, as she saw Sandy crouched behind a rock, with his rifle raised, taking careful aim at something.

She looked from behind the tree that was concealing her, to see at what Sandy was about to shoot.

Bang, went his rifle!

"Father!" she cried, and fired her pistol at Sandy.

How she inflicted a painful, but not dangerous wound in his left arm, and how he arose with a howl, we already know.

The wound was so slight that it did not disable him, but it taught him to respect the aim of the Giant Horseman's daughter.

CHAPTER X.

WHERE BIANCA MET THE BAND.

"WELL, darn your ugly picture! Where did you come from?" asked Sandy in astonishment, as he looked at Queredo, when the Giant Horseman, his daughter, Josh White and Sam Horton had been shut down in the stairway to the cave.

The dwarf nodded his great head, and burst into another loud laugh.

"Wonder if you ain't the devil!" observed Sandy, reflectively.

Queredo again nodded his head, more violently than before and made the mountains ring with his demoniacal laughter.

"You are one of his children anyhow, I am sure, but I don't believe your daddy is as home-

ly as you are, according to all the pictures I've seen of him."

Queredo evidently took this as a compliment for he laughed until he nearly rolled off the boulder.

"Quit your fooling, you imp, and tell me where to find the gang," said Sandy wrathfully.

The dwarf pointed over his head to the summit of the mountain.

"Up there?"

Queredo nodded.

"How many?"

The dwarf held up his two hands with all of his fingers extended but three.

"Seven?"

A nod.

"Captain with them?"

Another nod.

"Where are they going?"

Queredo turned half round and threw his hands in the direction of the plain that stretched away into the distant perspective from the valley a thousand feet below.

"Going to vamoose the ranch, eh?"

Queredo nodded.

"Why?"

Queredo shrugged his shoulders with a gesture that said as plainly as words that he didn't know and didn't care.

"Too hot to hold them?"

Another shrug.

"And they were going to leave me here to get out the best way I could, or have that big fellow on the big horse shoot a hole in me for fun, eh? There's pards for you. I didn't think Gila Jim would have gone back on me that way."

The lugubrious tone in which Sandy uttered this lament evidently amused Queredo, for he had to sit down to laugh.

Sandy raised his fist and made a vicious bang at Queredo's head.

But the dwarf was too active to take a blow. He ducked his head, and then jumping to the steep wall of rock, climbed it like a cat until he reached a ledge ten or twelve feet above Sandy's head, where he sat grinning in an aggravating way that would have cost him his life had Sandy been possessed of a firearm at that instant.

Sandy looked at the boulder, and saw that it would be impossible for any amount of strength below to remove it from its position. It was firmly wedged in, and could only be taken off the trap from the outside.

"Good!" chuckled Sandy.

His chuckle was echoed by Queredo, but in a much louder tone.

The dwarf never lost an opportunity to indulge in a laugh. It was the only sound he could make, and he enjoyed it.

"Shut up!" growled Sandy.

The dwarf chuckled again, and covered Sandy with his two six-shooters.

"Throw one of those down here," said Sandy.

"I may need a gun before long."

The dwarf slowly closed his left eye and opened it again, accompanying the action with a knowing leer that bore an unmistakable meaning.

"You think I might draw bead on you, eh?" muttered Sandy. "Well, perhaps you're right, I might."

Queredo could not hear Sandy's remarks, but he guessed their tenor, and laughed again.

"Say, Queredo!"

The dwarf mockingly put his right hand to his big flapping ear, as if afraid of losing a single word of Sandy's communication.

"I'll get even with you yet," muttered Sandy to himself. Then aloud: "How am I to get up there? I can't climb up the face of a straight wall, if you can. I don't see anything to hold to."

The dwarf stuck his feet into a rift in the rocks, and hung head downward over the ledge,

"Yes, he is a son of the devil, sure enough," muttered Sandy. "Nothing human could hang on that way."

The dwarf, as he hung, pointed to a certain spot in the rocky wall on a level with Sandy's head.

Sandy examined the spot closely and said:

"Yes, here is a rift, sure enough; but what is the good of that?"

Queredo pulled himself up to his ledge again, and drawing forth a lariat from one corner of his resting-place, let the end with a running noose down to Sandy.

"Make that lariat fast above, Queredo."

The dwarf, in a business-like manner, threw the end of the rope around a jutting mass of rock just above him.

"Are there any more holes for me to put my feet into, Queredo?"

Queredo leaned over and made signs that he would find more of them above his head.

"All right; I'll get there," said Sandy, cheerfully, as he fastened the rope around his waist with the dexterity of an old plainsman.

There was a wicked twinkle in Queredo'soggle eyes as he heard this remark.

"Just hold her steady above there, Queredo!"

The dwarf put his hand to the rope.

"I ain't as young as I was, Queredo, and climbing is harder work for me than it is for

you," gasped Sandy, as he struggled up the rock, until he got his foot into the rift which Queredo just pointed out.

The dwarf did not laugh. He was holding the rope steadily, and was a model of gravity and decorum.

A close observer, however, would have detected an expression of mischief in his hideous face.

"Steady above, Queredo! steady!" said Sandy, as he reached for another crack in the rock above that in which he had already, with the aid of the rope, placed his feet.

Sandy very gingerly drew himself up until he got his fingers in the crack.

"I'm getting there, Queredo. Keep the rope steady!"

The dwarf grinned.

"What are you doing, Queredo? What the deuce are you doing? Hold the rope steady!" suddenly bawled Sandy.

The rope was shaking violently.

"Keep it quiet, you imp, or I'll—"

With a dexterous twirl of the lariat the dwarf had caught one of Sandy's legs in a loop, and pulled him away from the rock, so that, with the slip-noose around his waist he hung head downward as helpless as a dead fish on a string.

"Help me out of this, darn you!" sputtered Sandy. "I'll get an apoplectic fit or something."

Queredo was amusing himself by pushing the rope to and fro, and banging Sandy against the rock at every oscillation.

"Let me up!" howled Sandy.

A loud laugh from Queredo was the only response.

Sandy struggled violently, but he was completely at the mercy of the grinning dwarf.

"I'll kill him, as sure as I get up to him," hissed Sandy, between his chattering teeth.

How long Queredo would have kept up his sport it is impossible to say. He showed no signs of helping the discomfited Sandy out of his fix, when something rattled over his head and a handful of sand and small stones came down from the top of the mountain.

Queredo stopped swinging the rope and looked up.

Several heads were projected over the edge of the precipice.

"Hallo, Queredo!" hailed some one from above.

Gila Jim and the gang!

They had missed the dwarf, and had just distinguished him on the ledge.

"Hallo, Queredo! What are you doing?"

It was Gila Jim's voice.

Queredo began hastily to try and disentangle Sandy.

"Curse you! You are knocking my head against a sharp point!" howled Sandy.

"What devilish trick are you playing down there?" cried Gila Jim, from above.

"I'll make it hot for you, Queredo, when I do get out of this," said Sandy.

Queredo made one more desperate effort, and managed to release Sandy's feet from the rope.

Sandy turned a somerset, and with a tremendous bang against the jagged rocks, hung right side up, but with the rope around his waist almost cutting him in two.

"Steady that rope, now," said Sandy to the dwarf, as he put his feet into a crevice and prepared to climb up to the ledge occupied by Queredo.

The latter's reply was to draw a six-shooter and point it at Sandy.

"What's that for?" asked Sandy.

Queredo nodded his head in the expressive way that supplied the place of speech with him, and grinned in malevolent triumph.

"Darn your ugly carcass! Put your gun away and help me up," bawled Sandy.

His voice reached Gila Jim above, and he saw that there was some trouble between his men underneath.

"If you don't put that gun away I'll do it for you, Queredo," he roared, as he brought his Winchester to bear on the dwarf's big head.

The dwarf hesitated.

He was afraid that if he did not keep his weapon ready for use, Sandy would seek revenge on him for the trick he had played. On the other hand, if he did not obey the orders of Gila Jim he knew that a bullet from the Winchester would come as sure as fate.

He quickly decided on a plan of action.

He thrust his pistol in his belt, and with one more swing of the rope that jarred poor Sandy with painful force against the jagged rocks, and a loud, tantalizing laugh, sprung from his ledge to another, several feet above, and disappeared from Sandy's view.

The dwarf knew every inch of the mountain and in a very short time stood by the side of Gila Jim on the brow of the precipice.

"What is the matter with Sandy?" was the first question put by Gila Jim.

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

Gila Jim leaned on the precipice and shouted:

"Hallo, Sandy!"

"Hallo!" was the answer.

"You'd better go around. You can't get up

this way. We'll meet you at Camp No. 1 to-night. We are going there now."

Leaving Sandy to get out of the rope and make his way to the rendezvous by himself, Gila Jim and his companions turned their horses toward the plain that stretched far into the distance.

Queredo was mounted, as well as his companions. The band was never at a loss for an extra horse, and when Nebo left the dwarf so unceremoniously it was the work of but a few moments to find him another horse.

The way lay along a comparatively smooth roadway that wound around the mountain, reaching the level some three miles away from Mezuto City and hidden from it by gigantic masses of rock.

Gila Jim was not the man to trust only to one refuge.

The camp in the woods was all well enough when the band were in comparatively good repute as hard-working miners, but there was another place, known to the band as Camp No. 1, where no one save the initiated had ever penetrated, and where the desperadoes had always considered themselves safe.

For Camp No. 1 were they at present bound.

The party had just reached the foot of the mountain and were about to dash across the open plain to a spot where a line of trees edged a small river when the quick ear of the dwarf caught the sound of a horse's hoof in the distance.

He made a sign, and all stood still, hiding themselves in the shadow of the mountain.

Along came the horse, though they could not see whether it bore a rider or not.

The band did not wish to make itself conspicuous just then, and therefore did not let its curiosity overcome its judgment.

"Do you want it, Cap?" asked a tall, thin, wiry-looking fellow, who seemed to be acting as Gila Jim's lieutenant.

"Guess so, Bill. If it isn't too much trouble. Our stock is running a little low."

"That's what, Cap. Besides, it is no use neglecting business at any time," returned the tall young man, who rejoiced in the name of Bill Scruggins.

The hoof-beats were getting nearer.

"Wish we could see who it is," said Gila Jim.

Queredo slipped off his horse, and crawled along the ground until he could peep around the corner of the rock that sheltered the gang.

The horse was coming very near now.

Queredo apparently could not quite make out to his satisfaction at first what the horse was, for he poked his head out a little further.

Then he drew it back in a hurry as a pistol-shot sounded loud and clear in the early morning air and a bullet whizzed past his ears.

At the same instant a woman's voice was heard, as she reined in her steed, and horse and rider burst into view of the Red Cross Band.

The Giant Horseman's daughter, Bianca!

CHAPTER XI.

A DOUBLE CHECKMATE.

"HANDS up!" yelled Gila Jim, as he and his companions all covered the girl with their Winchesters.

For one instant Bianca looked into the faces of the desperate men surrounding her, and then she raised her hands, one of which held a pearl-handled revolver.

"That's sensible," said Gila Jim, as he walked toward her, with his rifle ready for use if she showed any sign of bringing her pistol hand down.

"What do you want?" asked Bianca, the rich blood rushing indignantly into her beautiful cheeks.

"What do we want?" repeated Gila Jim, sarcastically. "That's good. The question is what do you want. I don't think it is very lady-like to go blazing away at an innocent little chap like that, who never harmed anybody," pointing at Queredo.

The dwarf roared with laughter at this sally. It was the best joke he had heard in all his life.

Gila Jim suddenly wrenched Bianca's pistol from her hand and took the other from her belt.

"Guess we'll take you along" he said. "You may be useful."

"What do you mean?" asked Bianca.

"Well, you made me a prisoner, and I don't see why I shouldn't take you on the same terms," sneered Gila Jim.

"Beware what you do!" said the girl. "My father will make you pay dearly for this outrage."

"Pshaw! Your father will have to make terms with us himself. We know his secret now."

"Secret?"

"Yes. Don't you know that I could get a thousand men who would wipe your father out in a minute for a share in that cave of his?" whispered Gila Jim.

"Villain!"

"Yes, I know all about that. Well, I don't need a thousand men. I have enough here to do all I want. As soon as I get that infernal Yankee, with his chatter about old Vermont,

where he cannot give me away to the police, I am going to work that cave, d'ye see?"

"My father will—"

"Your father won't do anything," interrupted the other. "I'll fix him."

"How?"

"This is Arizona, and a man is liable to get rubbed out by the Apaches any day or night, and—"

"Wretch!"

"And I can cover up my tracks!"

"Come, on captain," burst in Bill Scruggins at this juncture. "When you've done chinning to that girl we might as well get along. I don't feel very safe here."

Gila Jim seized the bridle of Bianca's horse and led it into the midst of his band.

Queredo rode up to her side, and putting his hands over his heart, leered at her in a way that made her feel as if she would have shot him dead without the least compunction.

Bianca was a brave girl. She saw that for the time she was helpless, and she went with her captors without useless complaining.

She knew that her father and his two companions would not be long before they would be searching for her, and then, Gila Jim, beware!

Sao had made her way to the corridor that led to the rocky entrance of the cave whence Gila Jim had escaped after bolting the inner door and, saddling her own horse, had come out on a mission for her father.

The Giant Horseman's subterranean house was pierced with secret doors in all directions, and though Gila Jim had imprisoned the occupants by fastening the small iron door when he made his escape, it was only a question of time, when the Giant Horseman and his friends would find means to open it.

Thus the presence of Bianca in the open air is easily accounted for.

The Red Cross Band made straight for the line of trees skirting the stream referred to above.

They stopped on the bank of the river.

"Queredo!" said Gila Jim.

The dwarf was off his horse and standing on that of Bianca, behind her, with his hands on her shoulders, in an instant.

"What are you going to do?" asked the girl of Gila Jim, with a flush of indignation.

Queredo laughed in her ears with a harsh guffaw, that nearly deafened her.

"He won't hurt you," said Jim. "It is a little ceremony that we must go through for our own safety. Do you see?"

Queredo pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and fastened it over Bianca's eyes.

She was totally blinded.

"I'm afraid we shall have to take you into the river," said Jim; "but we won't drown you. Don't be afraid."

One by one the members of the band waded into the river, holding their horses by the bridles and leading them, until they reached several old tree-trunks that lay carelessly on the surface of the water, with dead leaves and rubbish gathered round them.

A stranger would not have taken any particular notice of the old trees.

They had evidently been blown down at some time, tumbled into the river and floated down to their present position.

A close inspection would have revealed something more.

The trees rested on a small island.

The island was of solid rock, and with the exception of a space about six feet square, was covered entirely by water.

The trees were so dispersed over and around the island that it was impossible to distinguish it even a few feet distant.

The six feet of space showed a hole that was generally hidden by the trunk of one of the old trees.

It was the entrance to Camp No. 1.

Bill Scruggins pulled the tree from the opening and dragged his horse to the spot.

The animal had evidently been there before, for he leaped easily on the old tree trunks and plunged head-first through the opening into the camp.

A sloping path led into the bowels of the earth, below the bed of the river.

The other members of the band followed, until all were hidden save Gila Jim and Queredo with Bianca.

"Now, my young lady, it is our turn," said Jim.

"Where do you want me to go?"

"You will have to walk into the water, but I give you my word that you will not be in any danger."

He grasped her wrist, but she shook him off indignantly.

"See here, you may as well do as I tell you, because you will have to do it at last," said Jim. "I haven't any time to fool with girls. If you obey me, I will use you well. If you don't, why you can only blame yourself if you get hurt."

"Take the handkerchief off while I dismount," said Bianca.

Gila Jim impatiently threw his rifle on the ground and began to untie the handkerchief.

"How did you tie this thing, Queredo?" asked

Gila Jim. "Seems to me that it is as badly twisted and tangled as yourself. I can't untie these knots. Come here and take them out yourself."

The dwarf jumped on the saddle behind the young girl and busied his claw-like fingers with the knots.

Bianca shrunk as the dwarf's hands touched her cheeks, and he howled with delight as he noticed her repugnance and pressed his fingers against her face in a sheer spirit of mischief.

"Hurry up there, Queredo. We want to get under cover as soon as possible," said Gila Jim.

As the dwarf tugged at the knots he shifted the handkerchief from Bianca's eyes so that she could see something of her surroundings.

She noticed that Gila Jim's rifle was lying on the ground, and that he was standing several yards away from it, with his back toward it.

With a parting pressure on her cheeks with his clammy hands, the dwarf removed the handkerchief from her eyes, and she could look freely around her once more.

Queredo jumped from the horse and turned his back, as he seized the bridle of his own horse.

Bianca slowly dismounted and stood facing Gila Jim, with a questioning look in her lovely dark eyes.

Her rich riding habit, just reaching the ground, did not impede her movements, and her large hat, with its drooping feather, shaded her face effectually from the rays of the sun now streaming gloriously from the cloudless sky.

"Queredo!" said Gila Jim. "The handkerchief."

"What! Are you going to blind me again?" asked girl.

She knew what the answer would be, but she wanted to get as much delay as possible.

She was only three miles from her father, and there was the chance that he might appear at any moment.

"Of course I am going to blind you. The handkerchief was only taken off to give you a chance to dismount. If I hadn't been a fool I would not have humored you that much. But I always was polite to ladies, and I guess it is my early training sticking out of me," returned Gila Jim, with a grin.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"You have asked that question two or three times. I won't tell you. Is that straight enough?"

She saw that Gila Jim was getting angry, and knew that it was of no use questioning him further.

She turned around as he approached her with the handkerchief.

What should she do?

A happy thought!

With a start, she turned her head, and, pointing behind Gila Jim and Queredo, cried out, in a joyful tone:

"Father!"

Both the desperadoes turned quickly as their hands sought their belts, and they each drew a revolver.

With a bound Bianca reached Gila Jim's Winchester.

Seizing it by the barrel, she swung it around her head and aimed a blow at Gila Jim.

It missed his head, but struck his right hand, knocking his pistol far into the river and temporarily disabling his hand.

Another second and the girl was in her saddle.

"Throw up your hands!" to Queredo, as she covered him with the rifle.

The dwarf was so taken by surprise at this unexpected turn of affairs that his hands went up involuntarily.

"Away, Paquita!" whispered Bianca to her steed, as she fired a shot in Queredo's direction in the triumph of the moment.

The beautiful creature knew its mistress's voice, and obeyed with an eagerness that took them in a flash out of reach of Queredo's revolver, even if he had had presence of mind to use it.

She slung the Winchester over her shoulder and urged her horse on.

From the shadow of a large pine that grew on the very edge of the thicket from which she was emerging, sprung a man, who seized her by the throat and dragged her to the ground before she could offer the least resistance.

He dragged the Winchester from her, and putting its cold muzzle against her face, said slowly, while a devilish frown darkened his features:

"I'd kill you right here for a claw of tobacco!"

As he spoke, his fingers moved nervously on the trigger, and the girl closed her eyes.

She recognized the man, and she had no hope of mercy.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?" he growled.

"Because you are too much of a coward," replied the girl, defiantly.

"Well, darned if I don't admire your pluck, but it won't help you this time," was the reply. "I'm just going to get even with you for what you've done to me."

"Will you kill me in cold blood?"

"Call it that if you like," replied Sandy, for it was that worthy who had so inopportune appeared.

"But I ain't going to put the muzzle of my gun right down your throat when I pull the

trigger. I'll just go away a few yards and show you how well I can shoot. Then there will be fun for both of us."

Sandy meant what he said. Bianca could see that in every twinkle of his bloodshot eyes and every twitch of his cruel mouth.

He walked backward from her, keeping her carefully covered with the Winchester all the time, until he was about twenty yards away.

"Now, are you ready?" he asked, as he took careful aim at the girl's face.

She looked wildly around for some outlet of escape, and then a loud report rung in her ears.

She was not hurt!

A pair of arms grasped her from behind, and the voice of Gila Jim said:

"You are in a mighty big business, Sandy, blazing away at a girl like that. If I hadn't knocked up your arm just then, you'd have sent her to kingdom come without a doubt."

"What I meant to do!" growled Sandy.

"Just so, but we can't spare her yet. We want her to help us in a job we have on hand."

"Is it in connection with that big father of hers and that Yankee?"

"That's what it is."

"I'm with you then."

"Of course you are. Bring on the girl, Queredo. Guess you can hold her this time, can't you? She almost eunched us, but not quite. She can thank me that she's alive, anyhow. Bring her along, Queredo. Bring her along! And mind she don't slip through your fingers again."

Bianca was once more a helpless prisoner in the hanks of the Red Cross Band.

CHAPTER XII.

"MY DAUGHTER! MY DAUGHTER!"

WHEN the Giant Horseman, his daughter, Josh White and Sam Horton were so unceremoniously pushed into the stairway by Sandy and Queredo the two latter were too indignant to do anything but breathe vengeance.

"Fernandez, they've fooled us again," said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"We cannot get out of here either way, now, can we Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Then this entrance and the one by which we came in first are not the only ones. You have other doorways, have you?"

"Si, señor."

"The deuce take his Si, señor. He is so cool about everything he makes me nervous," muttered the young cowboy, under his breath.

The party made their way down to the apartment whence it will be remembered that Bianca had followed Sandy some hours before.

The room was just as she had left it.

The open piano, with the sheet-music spread on the desk, the torches burning, and the whole scene suggestive of recent occupation by a refined young lady.

"Well, here we are again, Fernandez. Does everything appear safe to you?"

"Si, señor."

"But—where is Nebo? He went down the stair ahead of us, and he isn't here. Does that horse possess the power of making himself invisible whenever he takes it into his head?"

"Nebo is safe," said Fernandez, as he motioned to his daughter to prepare a meal.

"But where is he?"

"In his stable."

"Did he get there himself?"

"Si, señor."

"How did he manage it?"

"Nebo knows the way."

The Giant Horseman walked to the corner of the room and listened for a moment at the small iron door.

"Anything there, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman gave the peculiar whistle that was the signal to Nebo.

"Nebo outside there, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Perhaps he can open the door," continued Josh White with a smile.

"Si, señor."

"What's that?" said Josh, starting. "Do you mean to say your horse will unbolt doors when he's asked? I was only joking when I asked the question, but it seems Nebo is equal to 'most anything."

"Si, señor."

Fernandez whistled again. There was the sound of sliding bolts, and the small iron door swung open, as Nebo's beautiful head appeared in the opening, the large mild eyes looking up into his master's face for a word of approval.

Fernandez stroked the face of his horse, and then signaled to him to go to his stable.

The docile animal obeyed, and Fernandez turned to Josh White.

A report, that was very welcome after the exciting adventures of the night, was soon dispersed of, and the Giant Horseman showed his two guests a small room where soft skins were piled up on the floor, and said:

"We cannot do anything until we have rested. The Red Cross Band cannot get far

away to-day. Sleep a few hours and then we will arrange our plans. Gila Jim shall be in your hands in less than two days. Fernandez promises you."

"I hate to sleep now, after being fooled the way we have been to-night," said Sam.

"Of course you hate to do so; so do I. But what are you going to do about it? Go to sleep, Sam, and you will be twenty times a better man when you wake. Isn't that so, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Always 'Si Señor,'" grumbled the cowboy to himself, as he threw himself on a heap of skins and com osed himself to sleep.

Josh White lay on another pile, and shut his eyes.

The Giant Horseman went back into the larger room, where his daughter was putting the remnants of the meal out of sight.

"Father."

"Well, my daughter?"

"I should like to take a gallop on Paquita. I cannot sleep now."

The Giant Horseman never argued with Bianca, so he only said:

"Go to the eastern stable and bring two horses. We shall need them this evening."

It must be stated that the cave already described was only a small portion of the great Lost Silver Mine. It extended for some miles east of the spot where the Giant Horseman and his daughter were conversing.

The eastern stable to which he dispatched his daughter was situated at the end of a corridor extending from Nebo's stable.

It could be approached underground, but a quicker and pleasanter mode of reaching it was by a gallop across the plain to a secret entrance in the rocks.

Bianca was on her way to this stable by the last-named route when she met with the adventures detailed in the previous chapter.

As soon as Bianca had gone, the Giant Horseman, after seeing that Nebo was supplied with food and bedding, returned to the inner apartment, and, stretching himself on the floor, was soon asleep.

The three men were worn out with their exertions during the night, and their slumber was as deep as that of children.

Hour after hour they slept in the impenetrable stillness of the mountain retreat.

Each had his weapons ready to his hand, and would have been broad awake at the least suspicious noise.

What was that?

Fernandez was sitting upright, with his six-shooter in his hand.

He laughed softly to himself as he lay down again.

"Nebo!" he muttered.

He had heard a slight scraping, and his quick ear had brought the sound to his brain even through his deep sleep.

Nebo's fond spirit had never been outraged by a restraining halter or a stable door.

He was free to go and come as he pleased.

His master was used to hearing his footfall resounding up and down the corridor at all times.

Therefore, when he uttered the name "Nebo," and lay down again it was with the comfortable conviction that nothing more disturbing than restlessness on the part of Nebo was the cause of the noise he had heard.

"Go away, Nebo," he said, as the horse came to the little inn door and scraped the ground violently with his fore feet.

At his master's voice Nebo whinnied.

"What's the matter, Fernandez? Are you awake?" broke in Josh White's voice.

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman got up and walked to the little doorway, where Nebo's head and neck were thrust through, in his desire to communicate with his master.

"Something troubles Nebo," said Fernandez as he placed his hand on the horse's neck and found it wet with perspiration.

"Well, let us find out what it is, Sam."

The young cowboy was on his feet in an instant.

"Sam," continued Josh White, "there's trouble of some kind in the wind. Fernandez knows his horse, and the horse has something on his mind."

"On his mind?"

"Yes, sir, for Nebo has a mind a great deal better in quality than many men I've met since I left old Vermount."

Nebo turned around and walked down the corridor, past his stable, to where the great rock that concealed the entrance was firmly in its place, as usual.

The three men followed, waiting for the horse to explain the cause of his agitation.

Nebo walked to the corner, where the rock would reveal an opening when moved, and whinnied.

"Somebody outside," said Fernandez.

"How do you know?" asked Josh White.

"Nebo never makes a mistake," returned the Giant Horseman.

"Um! Well. What are we to do? Let them in?" asked Josh White.

The Giant Horseman climbed up some natural

steps in the rock, where a small crevice let a ray of daylight stream in high above their heads.

It enabled occupants of the cave, by mounting the steps to see any one that might be outside.

Fernandez put his eyes to the crevice and then, with an exclamation of alarm, such as Josh White had never heard him utter before, rushed down the stairs and sought the secret spring that would move the massive rocky door.

"What is the matter, Fernandez?"

But the Giant Horseman's excitement would not allow him to reply.

He swung open the door, and pointed, with pale face and trembling lips at what stood outside.

It was his daughter's riderless horse, Paquita.

"My daughter! My daughter!" cried the Giant Horseman, in uncontrollable agony.

Josh White silently took the hand of the Giant Horseman in his own and pressed it.

Fernandez returned the pressure.

He knew it meant that Josh White would help him find his daughter or die in the attempt.

Sam Horton did not say or do anything. He seemed stupefied.

"Fernandez, are you ready to go?" asked Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"Then come. We will find her before we sleep again!"

"That we will," put in the young cowboy, as he grasped the hand of Fernandez. "It is the work of Gila Jim, I am convinced, but we will bring him to account and rescue the señorita sooner than he expects."

The Giant Horseman walked back to the stables and led out a horse saddled and bridled, which he signed to Sam Horton to mount.

Josh White took Paquita, sitting as easily on the lady's saddle as if it had been the ordinary kind for a man.

Fernandez handed a Winchester to each of his friends, and took one himself.

"Revolvers?" he asked, in one word.

Josh and Sam nodded, to indicate that they were supplied, and Fernandez threw himself on Nebo's back and looked inquiringly at Josh White.

"Which way are we going?" asked Sam Horton.

"Better make for the river, over there," said Josh White. "The camp is somewhere in that neighborhood, though I don't know exactly where. They were making for that place, I know, and I am much mistaken if we do not find some traces of the Señorita Bianca there, too."

The three horsemen rode swiftly and silently through the darkness until they reached the trees that fringed the river where Bianca had been taken by the Red Cross Band.

Suddenly Sam Horton reined in and jumped to the ground.

"Look, Josh!"

"What is it?"

"A silver-mounted riding-whip."

The Giant Horseman took the dainty switch in his hand, and exclaimed:

"My daughter's!"

"She has been here, and has fallen in with the Red Cross Band, as sure as I was born in old Vermount," said Josh White, slapping his thigh. "Keep up your spirits, Fernandez, and we'll make a good night's work of this."

"It is so dark that we can't follow up much here," said the cowboy.

"That's all right, Sam. Don't be impatient. I am always telling you that. Just trust your uncle from old Vermount."

"What are we going to do?" asked Sam.

"Look out! Cover!" yelled Josh White, as he slipped from his horse and got behind a tree, just as a shower of bullets rattled over their heads.

At the same instant a bright light, like that from a powerful bull's-eye lantern, streamed across the inky blackness at the margin of the river, and illuminated a single human face, that seemed to belong to some one standing up to the neck in the water.

"My daughter!" shrieked the Giant Horseman.

It was the face of Bianca!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VOICES IN THE FLAT ROCK.

"COVER, Fernandez! Cover!" yelled Josh White, as the Giant Horseman rushed desperately in the direction of the face.

The light had only been visible for an instant. Then it had gone out, and everything seemed darker than ever.

The Giant Horseman did not take any notice of the Vermonter's warning.

It was enough for him that his daughter was in the hands of the lawless desperadoes whom he was hunting down, and that he—her father—was within sound of her voice, if she would only speak to him.

"Bianca!"

No answer.

The place seemed to be utterly deserted.

"They must be somewhere handy, Fernandez," whispered Josh White. "Where there are shots there must be weapons, and guns and pistols don't go off by themselves—at least, not often. We are right close on the heels of G

Jim and his precious gang, and we'll hear from them again pretty soon, if I'm any judge of their habits."

"Listen," said Fernandez.

"What do you hear?"

But the Giant Horseman did not reply. He only bent his head down as if trying to catch some indistinct sounds.

"What is it?" asked the cowboy.

"Fellow!" said the Giant Horseman, as he mounted his horse and rode out of the thicket.

His two companions followed, though they had but a hazy idea of the Giant Horseman's object.

It seemed strange, to say the least, that, after seeing his daughter's face a minute before, and receiving indubitable proof, in the shape of a volley of bullets, that the gang they were hunting were in the vicinity, they should ride away, for nothing at all, apparently.

But the Giant Horseman did not offer any explanation.

He urged Nebo to his utmost speed, and, as a natural consequence, soon left his companions behind.

Nebo's stride was calculated to carry him far away from any competitor in a race.

Fernandez seemed to think of this in a few minutes, for he pulled up and allowed Josh White and Sam Horton to catch him.

"Pardon me, señor," said the Giant Horseman.

"Don't mention it, Fernandez. But where are we going?"

"Listen!"

The three men strained their ears.

"Geewhillikens!" ejaculated Josh White. "They are galloping toward Mezuto City."

"Si, señor."

"How do we know who they are?" asked Sam Horton.

"I heard them when we stood by the river," said the Giant Horseman.

"Wonder what they are going to do at Mezuto City?" said Sam.

"That is simple enough," returned Josh White. "Gila Jim knows that I have located his hangout in the thicket on the river, and he is afraid we might drop right in on him at some awkward time."

"But what can he do in Mezuto City? We know every place there where he can hide."

"Yes, we do, Sam. And we know that there are places where we could never find the gang if they paid the owners of the ranches to keep them dark. The only way we can get them is to fight our way to them."

"Well," said Sam, as he clutched his Winchester tighter.

"I propose to fight my way to them!"

"Josh, I'm with you!" said Sam, taking the Vermonter's hand and giving it a hearty grip. "But say, Josh, you don't think they are taking the señorita with them to Mezuto, do you?"

"I do," said Josh, gravely, "and that's one reason why we should hurry up and catch them before they get there; eh, Fernandez, don't you think so?"

"Si, señor."

"Always 'Si, señor,' no matter what is going on," thought Sam. "He is the coolest man I ever met."

"And the bravest," added Josh White.

Sam had spoken his thoughts aloud, without knowing it.

The three dashed ahead and soon the twinkling lights of Mezuto City were before them.

"I haven't heard them the last ten minutes," said Josh White. "Guess they have found cover. We shall have to get them out of it, that's all."

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman and his companions rode down the main street and entered the saloon where Sam Horton had had the bowie-knife fight described in a previous chapter.

It was early in the evening and but few visitors were in the stuffy little bar-room.

The landlord, surly as ever, nodded in what was for him a friendly way at Sam Horton and Josh White.

"There's cl'ar grit in them fellows," he remarked to a crony, pointing to the two young men. "Wonder if that big fellow can fight," he added, as he bestowed a curious glance on Fernandez.

The Giant Horseman was not a stranger to the denizens of Mezuto City, but no one knew who or what he was, while his place of residence had always been kept an inviolable secret.

The Lost Silver Mine would have been too much of a temptation to the average Mezuto City miner.

"Any strangers here to-night?" asked Josh, as he ordered drinks for the house.

"Nary a one," returned the landlord, counting the number of people who were to participate in the treat, and mentally adding three to the "round."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"Here I am, sir—here I am," said that fussy individual, as he stepped inside the door at that moment. "What can I do for you, gentlemen; what can I do for you?"

"Take a drink, first thing, sheriff," said Josh White.

"A drink? Well, yes; don't care if I do. It is a little raw in the night air. Landlord, I'll take a little vitriol and red fire."

The sheriff drank his whisky and red pepper-sauce, and leaned his elbow on the bar with the easy grace of a public official who knows his own importance.

"Sheriff, you remember a man was—was—a—was—"

"Executed!" put in the sheriff, briskly. "That is the word you want. He was a member of a notorious band of horse-thieves, and this young man," putting his hand on Sam Horton's shoulder, "helped the officers of the law by removing a criminal from their path. Rather troublesome for our young friend here, of course, but it reflected great credit on him. By gosh! this talking makes me thirsty."

"Take another," said Josh White.

"Eh? Another? Well, I don't mind. Landlord, a little more of the same."

The sheriff's red nose began to glow and he was getting more talkative every minute.

"The man that was—executed, belonged to a gang called the Red Cross Gang," said Josh White. "There are plenty of people in Mezuto who know all about the gang—"

"That's what!" put in the landlord. "The worst crowd of horse-thieves that ever operated in the West."

"Well," went on Josh, "there are about a dozen of the Red Cross Gang still operating around these parts."

"You don't say! Darned if that don't make me feel quite faint," said the sheriff, putting his hand on his chest.

"Does it? Well, try another drink," suggested Josh.

"Give me a schooner of whisky with a dash of red pepper this time," said the sheriff.

When the sheriff had swallowed his fiery dose Josh White went on:

"I have reason to think that a lot of the gang came into Mezuto within the last half-hour and are in some of the houses on the street. Do you know anything about them, sheriff?"

The sheriff had now arrived at the preliminary stage of intoxication when he looked at every thing from a very grave and judicial point of view.

"Now, see here, young man," he said, slowly and solemnly. "I dunno (hic) where these here fellows are. But I'm quite (hic) sure they are not in Mezuto, because I've been standing outside this saloon ever since noon—"

"Except when you came in for a drink," put in the landlord gruffly.

"That's all right. But you know I haven't had a drink for three hours until now."

"Well, take another, to make up for it," said Josh White.

"Thanks! Landlord (hic) I think some whisky and red pepper would sit my digestion. That's (hic) what I always take when I'm sick."

"You say you have been standing at the door here since noon, eh?" said Josh White.

"Young man, that's (hic) what I said."

"You hear that, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"What are we to do now?"

"Look somewhere else for them, I should say," remarked Sam Horton. "They might have gone up to their old camp on the mountain."

"Well, wherever they are, we are sure they are not here, so we may as well travel. Eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Come on, then."

"Boys, I'll go with you," announced the sheriff, with solemn condescension.

"All right, sheriff. Where's your horse?" asked Josh White.

"Hitched outside," returned the sheriff. "And a darned good (hic) horse it is. But say, young man, I'm awfully thirsty."

Another dose of whisky and red pepper, and the fussy little sheriff was ready to start.

The four rode slowly down the street, the little sheriff wobbling from side to side on his horse in a way that suggested the probability of his falling off before he got very far.

They cleared the town and riding past the concealed entrance to the Silver Mine which the Giant Horseman called his house, climbed a path that led toward the shanty of the Red Cross Band.

"Where are we (hic) going?" asked the sheriff.

"Not very far," replied Josh White.

"I hope not. I'm (hic) dreadfully thirsty already."

The path was rugged, with many loose stones scattered around.

The Giant Horseman dismounted and signaling to Nebo to go ahead, walked along with his eyes bent on the ground.

The others followed silently, save for an occasional grunt from the little sheriff, who was longing for more whisky and red pepper.

"What does that (hic) big fellow keep on stoppin' for and looking down on the ground? Be (hic) don't expect to find the gang hidden behind those (hic) st mes, does he?" asked the sheriff.

Suddenly the Giant Horseman stepped and

held up his hand for his companions to do the same.

"What's the matter, Fernandez? Have you found anything?"

"Si, señor."

"Always 'Si, señor,'" grumbled Sam Horton, *sotto voce*.

"What is it, Fernandez?"

"Listen, señor."

"Well, I am listening, but I can't hear anything," returned Josh White.

"More (hic) can I," added the sheriff, trying hard to keep his eyes wide open.

The Giant Horseman bent lower, and taking Josh White's hand, drew him toward a large flat rock on which he was leaning.

"Listen, señor."

Josh White listened intently.

"Well, I swan! If they don't beat anything in my experience, even in old Vermont."

"Listen again, señor."

"What can you hear, Josh?" asked the young cowboy, coming to the spot.

"What do you hear, Sam Horton?" asked Josh White.

But the cowboy did not answer. His steel-blue eyes were blazing with a mixed expression of rage, vengeance and supernatural terror.

Something had struck his ear that was entirely new in his experience.

Meanwhile, the Giant Horseman with his face touching the rock, was still listening.

"Say, what's you (hic) fellows doing there?" asked the sheriff. "If there's (hic) anybody that wants (hic) arresting, why, I'm the man to do it, an' (hic) don't you forget it."

The little sheriff rolled off his horse and staggered toward the flat rock.

"Fernandez, what does it mean?" asked Josh.

"Yes, Fernandez, (hic) what does it mean?" added the sheriff.

"We must go at once," said the cowboy. "Lead on, señor, and we'll follow, to the gates of perdition, if you like!"

"Don't get excited, Sam," said Josh White.

"Keep cool, boy!"

The Giant Horseman called Nebo to his side and throwing himself into the saddle, galloped headlong down the path up which they had just come.

"That's rather (hic) uncere-cere-cere-monious!" said the sheriff, as he struggled with difficulty to the back of his horse.

Josh White and Sam Horton did not speak. They mounted and dashed after the Giant Horseman, with their Winchesters unslung, ready for instant use.

What had they heard at the flat rock?

They had heard the voices of Gila Jim and his companions demanding the secrets of the Lost Silver Mine from some one—a woman, and they had heard the woman say she would die before she would reveal them.

Then they had heard a volley of oaths and the woman's voice cry despairingly:

"Father?"

The woman was Bianca!

CHAPTER XIV.

MOTHER BESS

WHEN Gila Jim and Queredo appeared in time to prevent the cold-blooded murder of the Giant Horseman's daughter by Sandy, the latter did not hesitate to express his disgust with the interference.

"Why are you so anxious to interpose to preserve the damsel?" demanded Sandy, with a burst of eloquence. "Her continued sojourn in this mundane sphere is not essential to your enjoyment of things, is it?"

"Oh, let up on your dictionary words. They are out of place here," returned Gila Jim. "Queredo, bring on that girl."

The dwarf, with his long fingers grasping Bianca's arms, pushed her forward.

"Queredo! That's so!" yelled Sandy, as he made a dash at the dwarf's throat and bore him to the ground. "I owe you one!"

Sandy's grasp tightened on the dwarf's wind-pipe and the big face turned purple.

"Quit that, will you, Sandy?" said Gila Jim, who seized Sandy behind and tried to pull him away.

But the dwarf as soon as he recovered from the shock of the first onslaught, shook Sandy off himself and took charge of the girl again as if nothing had happened.

"I'll kill that little wretch yet," muttered Sandy, as he slowly followed with Gila Jim.

"Oh, no, you won't, Sandy. He is too useful. We can't afford to have him killed—at least, not just yet."

The means of reaching the interior of Camp No. 1 has already been described.

Suffice it to say that Gila Jim hastily made a raft of a few logs that happened to be drifting down the river and thus introduced Bianca to the camp without compelling her to wade through the water in the usual way.

As soon as they reached the bottom of the raft they led from the outer opening to the interior. Bianca found herself in a passage about six feet wide and extending far back into the darkness.

Used to a subterranean home, as she was, she could not repress a feeling of horror as she tried

to imagine what secrets that dismal passage might reveal if it were thoroughly searched.

The desperate character of the Red Cross Band was known to every one in Arizona.

Horses were stolen, miners were robbed and murdered, and outrages of all kinds committed, and the perpetrators were always said to be the Red Cross Band.

Still, the crimes could never be proved to be their work, and, moreover, no one could ever find a man conclusively known to be a member of the band.

Thus, when, on the death of Nosey Cripps at the hands of Sam Horton, the red cross was found on the back of the dead man, the general surprise was as great as the execution.

Bianca was led down the pathway by Gila Jim, and told to sit down on a rough bench against the wall.

Gila Jim then took a whistle from his pocket and blew it gently.

The rest of the band at once appeared from the shadows of the passage.

"All here?" asked Gila Jim.

"All here, Cap," responded Bill Scruggins, as he brought his lanky form into view.

"How many?"

"Well, let me see; there's eight, now that poor Nosey Cripps is gone."

"Eight?"

"Yes, that's the rooster."

"Who is that, back behind the barrel?"

"Where? Oh, yes! Well, if you want to count her too, that makes nine."

"Oh, yes, it is Mother Bess. I had forgotten her," said Gila Jim.

"She's a pretty good man, when it comes to a tussle, Cap, anyhow," said Bill Scruggins. "She and that son of hers make a team that I wouldn't want to tackle."

Queredo, who had been listening to this colloquy, laughed boisterously.

"Shut up!" commanded Gila Jim.

"Yes, keep your mouth shut, you fool!" put in a harsh, croaking voice, and a little old woman, with a sack coat and a sombrero disputing with her dilapidated skirt her claim to womanhood, came from behind the barrel and gave one of Queredo's large ears a vicious pull.

The old woman was Mother Bess, and the prepossessing Queredo was her only son.

Queredo looked at his mother with a savage glance for a moment, but did not resent her attack.

"Now, Bill," resumed Gila Jim, "we have work to-night."

"Good!" said Bill Scruggins.

"Good!" added everybody in the band, save Queredo, who only chuckled in a satisfied manner.

"What is the racket?" asked Scruggins.

"It is just here," said Gila Jim, "Sandy and I were trapped by that big fellow on the big horse, and he took us into that den of his just outside of Mezuto. Well, boys, he thought he had us foul, and that we wouldn't be likely to go where we liked again for fifteen or twenty years — perhaps not at all."

Queredo chuckled, and Mother Bess gave his ear another savage pull.

"We fooled 'em, though, eh, Jim?" put in Sandy.

"Of course. It takes a smart man and a strong jail to hold the captain," assented Bill Scruggins, admiringly.

"Anyway, we got out," went on Gila Jim. "An' now, boys, I've got something to tell you about the place. You've all heard about the great Lost Silver Mine of the Black Forest?"

"Yes, yes," broke in several eager voices.

"What about it?"

"The mine where the silver lies in great bars, almost pure, waiting to be taken out by the men lucky enough to find it."

"Yes, we know. Go on with your yarn," said Bill Scruggins. "You don't mean to say you've found it, eh, Cap?"

"Where there are fortunes for a thousand men and silver enough to lay a double-track silver railroad around the world," went on Gila Jim, with tantalizing deliberation.

"Gosh, Cap, why don't you come to the point of your story? Do you know where this mine is — that's the question."

"Do I know where it is?"

"Yes—yes! Why don't you speak Cap?"

"Boys, I do know where it is," said Gila Jim, impressively.

"Where is it?"

"It is within rifle-shot of where we are standing at this minute."

"In which direction?"

"I'll tell you later on."

"Why don't you tell us now?"

"Because I don't want you to do anything rash."

"Rash?"

"Yes, the mine is the claim of another man, and he means to work it all for himself."

"Who is the man?"

"Can't you guess?"

A light seemed to suddenly break over the band, as Bill Scruggins said, with an oath:

"Of course, boys! The captain as good as told us at first. The Lost Silver Mine is the prison he and Sandy got out of yesterday."

"You've hit it, Bill," said Sandy. "It seems a pity to let all that wealth belong to one man, especially to a man that has acted as mean to the captain and me as that big fellow they call the Giant Horseman. What do you say, captain?"

"That will do, Sandy. I'm doing the talking for the crowd just now," said Gila Jim, with dignity.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Queredo.

Sandy picked up a stone and threw it at the dwarf, who dodged it and laughed louder than ever.

"Shut up that big hole in your face, Queredo, will you," said Bill Scruggins, "and let the captain talk."

"Now, boys," went on Gila Jim, "this Giant Horseman, as he is called, says he is going to hunt down the Red Cross Gang and hang us all to a tree, unless he can prevail on his crowd to let us go to State Prison instead. You all know what a time we have had for the last day or two. It is too hot for us and our ranch on the mountain, and we don't know how soon they may find us here."

"Just wish they would come here. I'd make it warm for 'em," croaked Mother Bess, as she drew a long knife from a belt beneath her old sack coat.

"How we are going to keep those fellows out of here, and at the same time get a hold on that mine, is what we've got to settle," said Gila Jim. "If there is any man that don't want to take the risk of this job, now is the time to say so, and he can stay here with Mother Bess."

"How do you know that Mother Bess is going to stay here?" croaked the old woman. "What's the matter with my going along, too? I guess I can pull a trigger with the best of you!"

"All right, mother. We'll talk about that afterward. Is there any man here that don't want to join in this thing? You know what it means if we slip up in it. A rope or a prison, as sure as we are here now."

"We are all ready to take our chances on that; eh, boys?" said Bill Scruggins, looking round at the rest of the gang.

"Every man of us!"

"Good! We start at sundown. Mother Bess, you will take care of this young lady. She will go with us to show us the way into the mine."

"Never!" said Bianca, drawing herself up to her full height and looking defiantly into the face of Gila Jim.

"Take her away, Mother Bess. She will talk differently this evening. Let her take a sleep for a while, so that she will be ready for business to-night."

"Come along, dearie!" said the old woman, as she grasped Bianca's wrist in anything but a gentle fashion.

Into a small den, divided from the main passage by a heavy door, was Bianca led.

The old woman chuckled as she closed the door and locked it on the inside with a large key, that she afterward put carefully into her pocket.

"There, dearie; we are both locked in now, don't you see, so I ain't treating you any worse than myself. Old Mother Bess is a good-natured soul every time, and that's what keeps her poor."

There was a candle burning on a rough table in the middle of the little room, and the hag chuckled so violently over her neat little joke that she nearly blew the light out.

"There's some blankets over in that corner, and you can lie down and go to sleep. Do you want anything to eat?"

She shook her head.

"All right. Now, lie down."

Bianca, in spite of her gentle disposition, was a brave girl.

She knew that she was in a perilous situation, and, worse still, that her father's life was threatened, without her being able to warn him; but she did not give way to vain repining.

She had plenty of self-reliance, and hoped yet that she might find some way of putting her beloved father on his guard.

She obeyed the old woman, and lay down on the blankets in the corner.

"That's right, dearie. Always do as you're told, and you will get a fortune and a handsome husband some day. Hope you'll sleep well. The last person that slept on those blankets was a tenderfoot from Cincinnati. He quarreled with Queredo about something, and Queredo filled him full of lead."

Bianca started in involuntary horror.

"Oh, that's nothing, dearie. He wasn't dead when he slept in those blankets. I am only telling you about him to amuse you, that's all."

The hag showed her yellow fangs in a grin as she spoke, and there was a strong suggestion of her hopeful son in her hideous features. She was worthy to be the mother of Queredo.

"I guess I'll take a little sleep myself," said Mother Bess. "There's plenty of hard work here all the time, and my old bones don't get as much rest as they should."

She stretched herself on some blankets that she spread on the floor in front of the door.

"Ah, it's good to lie down," she grunted.

"Good-night, dearie. Well, if I haven't left the candle burning. Guess we can see to sleep in the dark, eh, dearie?"

She arose from her blankets, and putting some matches on the table by the side of the candlestick, blew out the candle and hobbled to her blankets again.

To the surprise of Bianca, the room was not in total darkness when the candle was extinguished.

Through cracks in the wall the light from the passage, where a number of torches were showing the members of the Red Cross Gang each other's faces, streamed into the little room, while from above fugitive rays of daylight made their way through holes and fissures from the outer air.

Bianca, though tired, could not sleep.

She had too many thoughts disturbing her mind to allow her to give way to slumber.

Her father! She must give him warning in some way! The Red Cross Gang meant mischief, and they were determined to use her against her father in some unexplained manner.

One thing was certain. They would find that she would die before she would help them to injure her beloved father!

The first thing to be done was to escape from the room in which she was confined.

Bianca was, as has been said before, thoroughly self-reliant.

She listened intently to the old woman's breathing. As soon as she was asleep something might be done.

Mother Bess kept muttering as she turned uneasily on her blankets, and it was fully an hour before Bianca was satisfied that she was asleep.

"She is off at last," thought Bianca. "Now to secure the key from her pocket."

The girl arose from her blankets and stole softly across the room.

There was enough dim light to guard her against stumbling over anything.

The old woman was breathing heavily in a sound sleep.

Gently Bianca walked to her side and put her hand on the old woman's sack coat.

"The pocket is underneath this lapel, I know," thought Bianca, "and I saw her put the key in it."

Cautiously she lifted the lapel with her left hand, and put her right into the pocket.

Yes, there was the key.

She pulled it gently, but the old woman was lying in such a position that she could not draw it from the pocket.

She gave another pull, and Mother Bess moved slightly, with a muttered oath.

Bianca took her hand away and held her breath for a few seconds.

The old woman was breathing regularly again.

Bianca resumed her attempts to take the key. Now she had it in her hand. It was coming gradually. One more pull, and —

With a croaking shout, Mother Bess sprung from her bed and clutched the girl by the throat!

CHAPTER XV.

BIANCA'S RUSE.

"WHAT are you trying to do?" hissed Mother Bess fiercely, as Bianca threw her off with hardly an effort.

"Nothing!" said the girl.

"Nothing?"

"I was restless and I thought I would walk up and down the room for a little while, that was all."

"Oh, that was all, was it, dearie?" sneered the old woman.

"Yes."

"And what were you going to do with me, if that was all, my innocent birdie?"

"I did not see you in the dark, and I accidentally stumbled over you," replied Bianca, as disdaining further controversy, she walked toward her own side of the room and sat down on her rude bed.

"Now, look here, young woman," said Mother Bess, changing her bantering tone to one of demoniacal fierceness. "You are in my care, now, and I am going to take care of you. The boys know that they can trust Mother Bess, or they wouldn't have left you to me."

"Well, what is all this talk to me?" asked Bianca contemptuously. "I have no interest in your relations with the Red Cross Gang."

"Haven't you? Well, we will see about that later on. You may tell me that you were sneaking about the room because you were reckless, if you like, but you can't fool old Mother Bess, let me tell you."

"I have no wish to fool you."

"Good job, because you can't do it."

"If that is all you have to say to me, I will try and go to sleep," said Bianca wearily.

"Sleep! Yes, that is what you shall do. I will make you sleep."

"What do you mean?" cried Bianca in startled tones, as something in the old woman's words struck a nameless terror to her heart.

"Oho! so you are a little more interested, are you?" chuckled Mother Bess.

"Do you mean that you would —"

"What?"

"Murder—me?"

"Murder you? Oh, no; I haven't that privilege just now. The boys want to see you first. When they have made you show them the way to a certain place, and taught them how to get into your father's private parlor, they may hand you back to me, but not before, dearie—not before."

"Cold-blooded villains!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the old woman, so much like her, that for the moment Bianca could hardly persuade herself that it was not Queredo's harsh tone she heard.

"They will never make me betray my father," said Bianca, decidedly.

"Perhaps not, dearie, perhaps not. We shall see. But see here, that is not what we are talking about now. I don't trust you very much, and I don't propose to take any more chances with you now."

"Chamees!"

"Yes, that's what I said. Now, listen!"

"Go on."

"I shall not go to sleep again very soon, and if I hear any more of your being *restless*, I'll find a way to help you quiet until you are wanted by the boys. Now, you hear me."

"I shall be quiet."

"Good; you'd better."

"But what do you mean by finding a way to make me keep quiet?"

"Do you want to know, dearie?"

"Yes."

"Well, you know there is a certain kind of stuff that you can buy in drug stores in the cities that will make people sleep."

"Yes," said Bianca, breathless with horror, as the old woman's meaning gradually became plain to her. "Yes, go on."

"That's all."

"All! What is the stuff?"

"It is stuff that you can take a small bottle of and put it on a handkerchief over a person's mouth, and—and—they'll sleep very sound."

"Yes."

"So sound," went on the old woman, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, and speaking very slowly and solemnly, "that sometimes—sometimes—they never wake again!"

"Awful—awful" groaned Bianca.

"I've got some of this stuff," continued Mother Bess, not hearing Bianca's exclamation, and, if I have to, I will use it on you. Now, do you understand me, or do you want me to prove to you that I speak the truth?"

"No—no. This terrible liquid is—"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the old woman.

"Chloroform!"

"That's what it is, dearie. I always keep some of it by me, in case of emergencies. It's useful and doesn't make any noise. That is where it is better than a gun, d'ye see?"

"You will not need it for me. I shall not disturb you again. I am going to try and sleep more," replied Bianca.

"All right, dearie. I hope you will. I don't want to do anything desperate," returned Mother Bess, as she lay down on her blankets, "but I have the bottle right here in my pocket. That reminds me. I have something else in a bottle that is not quite so dangerous, but is a great deal nicer than chloroform. I'll take a little, I guess."

The old woman hobble from her bed to a shelf against the wall, from which she took a bottle and put it to her lips.

A strong odor of whisky filled the room.

"Have some, dearie?"

"Thank you, no!"

"Foolish, dearie; it is the best thing in the world to drive away the blues, and it's death on rheumatiz. That's what I take it for. This place is damp, right under the river, and we need something of this kind to take the place of doctors. I guess I'll take another one with myself, if you won't join me."

The old woman did take another, and two more afterward. Then she went back to bed.

"Remember what I told you, dearie," she said, as she dropped on her blankets. "You needn't think I'm going to sleep, because I ain't."

Bianca did not answer.

The young girl's thoughts were not of the pleasantest character, but she had no desire to escape them by continuing in conversation with her jailer.

What would her father do when she did not return in a reasonable time, and what terrible plot was being formed against him by these desperate men who were known as the Red Cross Gang?

What were they going to use her for?

She surmised, from what had been let fall by Gila Jim and Mother Bess they would try and force her to lead them into the cave, and thus enable them to surprise and overpower her father and his friends, and take possession of the great Lost Silver Mine.

But they should never succeed!

They should find that, girl as she was, she had a will as determined as her father, who, quiet and unassuming as he was generally, could be as unyieldingly resolute as iron when occasion required.

If she could only get out of this underground prison, she would soon find means to foil the villains who had her in their power.

Thinking thus Bianca dropped asleep.

How long she slept she knew not, but she awoke with a star.

The old woman! Was she sleeping?

Bianca listened, holding her breath the while.

Mother Bess inhaled something unintelligible as she turned over on her blankets.

She was not sound asleep yet, but the whisky she had drank was evidently doing its work.

Bianca waited patiently for another quarter of an hour, during which the old woman gradually composed herself until her regular breathing proclaimed that she was fast asleep.

Bianca waited ten minutes longer, hastily deciding upon her course of action in the mean time.

With all the resolute will inherited from her father, Bianca had made up her mind that she would escape from her predicament if it were within the bounds of human possibility.

Her proud spirit would not brook being held like a rat in a trap.

But if she managed to get out of the room, how much better off would she be?

She could not hear any sound from the corridor outside, where the men were, but no doubt they had some one on guard.

Never mind! She would not borrow trouble. It was enough to fight difficulties when they were met.

She would gain the corridor somehow, and then if necessary, would teach the gang that the Giant Horseman's daughter could fight for her liberty to the death.

Mother Bess was asleep now, beyond doubt.

Bianca arose from her blankets and crept softly to the old woman's side.

The girl made a hasty resolve not to risk waking the hag if she could avoid it.

Gently she passed her hand over the dress of the sleeper until she found the pocket in which was the key.

Ah! What was that?

Her hand had come in contact with a hard object that she knew at once was a small bottle.

The chloroform!

The bottle was tucked in the old woman's belt, ready to her hand in case she wanted to use it.

Here was Bianca's opportunity, and she was not slow to grasp it.

Render the old woman unconscious with the drug, and access to the key would be easy.

The girl cautiously drew the bottle from its hiding-place, Mother Bess sleeping quietly, and not making the least movement.

To saturate her handkerchief with the chloroform was to Bianca the work of an instant.

Then she passed it backward and forward under the sleeper's nose two or three times.

An uneasy movement showed that the drug was taking effect.

The girl put some more chloroform on the handkerchief and then pressed it hard over Mother Bess's mouth and nostrils.

With a stifled exclamation the old woman awoke. But she was so much under the influence of the deadly fluid that she could not struggle very much.

Her movements became less and less violent, and her exclamations fainter, as she gradually succumbed to the chloroform.

"It is a terrible thing to do, I know," thought Bianca, "but I was forced to do it. She would have used the stuff on me if the humor had taken her, or she had thought it necessary to insure her own safety, or even comfort.

Now for the key!

In a second the girl held it in her hand.

With once more glance at the old woman, whom she had pulled away from the door, and who was lying on her back in the middle of the room, with the chloroform-soaked handkerchief over her face, Bianca put the key in the lock and turned it gently.

It creaked noisily.

"Hallo!" hailed a man's voice, which she recognized as that of Bill Scruggins. "What do you want, Mother Bess?"

Fortunately, Bianca was a good mimic, so she replied in a voice so like the old woman's croak that Scruggins was completely deceived:

"Nothing particular. It is a little close in here, that's all."

"Oh, give us a rest," was the gruff response. "You never complained of that afore. Go in and soak your head."

Bianca had opened the door a little way while Scruggins was speaking, and had seen that he was sitting on a barrel by the side of a table, on which he was amusing himself with a greasy pack of cards by the light of a torch stuck in the ground by his side.

She could see several men lying on the ground, wrapped in blankets, and she knew that at the first alarm they would all be on the alert.

A happy thought struck her.

Taking the chloroform-bottle, which was not quite empty, from the table, she poured the remainder of the liquid on the handkerchief on Mother Bess's face.

The hag was totally unconscious.

Two minutes later Bill Scruggins said:

"Well, now, Mother Bess, what are you doing out here? Where is your prisoner? Oh, you are locking the door. Well, that is all right, but I wouldn't have left her there by herself if I had been you. You know what the captain is. If anything goes wrong it won't be well for you."

"Won't it?" croaked Mother Bess's voice.

"Lot I care for the captain. See this?"

The long, glittering knife always worn by the hag was drawn from beneath her old sack coat, and flourished before Bill Scruggins's eyes.

"Ha, ha! Mother Bess, you are getting altogether too fresh. The captain will be taking it out of you if you don't sinner down, I'm thinking."

"Will he? We shall see!"

The old woman's sombrero was pulled down over her brows, and she chuckled maliciously as she walked slowly along toward the opening that led out of the camp on the island.

Mother Bess was about to reply, when suddenly the noise of firing was heard in the distance, and in an instant the camp was in confusion.

"Hurry, boys! There they are!" yelled Gila Jim. "Mother Bess, you stay and look after the girl."

The gang tumbled out quickly, and in an instant the grotesque figure of the old woman was the only animate object in the corridor.

She did not seem to care much about her prisoner, but rushed up the sloping nail to the outer end, and standing with her face just over the logs that concealed the entrance, tried to see what was going on in the gloom of the thicket.

Just then the bright light of a powerful magnifying lantern, almost as large as the headlight of a locomotive, flashed on her face, and Queredo's chuckling laugh sounded at her elbow, as he pulled her violently back.

The fiendish dwarf had seen through the disguise.

The face beneath Mother Bess's sombrero was not that of the old woman, but of *Bianca, the Giant Horseman's daughter!*

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MINE.

BIANCA obeyed her first impulse and drew her knife from her belt. She had taken the precaution to secure Mother Bess's weapon when she borrowed her clothes.

She made a stroke at Queredo's big head, but he dodged the blow and laughed in his irritating way as he dragged her down the corridor.

Though only a dwarf, Queredo's strength far exceeded that of an ordinary man.

"Let go of my arm, or I will stab you to the heart!" said Bianca, desperately.

Queredo's mocking laugh was the only answer.

He forced her into the room from which she had so lately escaped, and in which Mother Bess was sitting, on a corner of the table, holding the now empty chloroform bottle in her hand, and evidently trying to comprehend what had happened.

"Hallo, dearie," said the hag, as Queredo thrust the girl violently into the room, and stood in the doorway with a torch in his hand. "Hallo, dearie; why, where have you been? And so Queredo has brought you back, has he? That's right, my son, always take care of your mother's guests."

Queredo wagged his great head in his grotesque fashion, and grinned like a demon incarnate.

"Why, I declare if you are not wearing my cloak, that was made in Paris, and imported at an immense expense for my especial use," suddenly croaked Mother Bess, as she sprung at Bianca and pulled at the old sack coat which still enveloped the girl's shoulders. "That is the most astonishing impudence I ever heard of in my life. Come out of it!"

The hag pulled the cloak off and put it on her self with as much ceremony and care as if it really had been the precious production of a Parisian modiste.

"My hat, too," she croaked, snatching the sombrero from Bianca's hand.

"That all you took, I wonder?" went on the old woman, feeling around the old sack coat, and apparently thinking.

Bianca had hastily secreted the knife in her dress and determined not to give it up unless overpowered completely.

"My knife, where is it?" shrieked the old woman. "I would not lose it for anything. It was given me thirty years ago, by Rustling Ralph, Queredo's father, and it never misses its aim. Give it to me, you—you—"

The old woman was in such a rage that she could only sputter, while Queredo stood dutifully by and laughed at his aged parent's eagerness.

"Give me that knife!" demanded the old woman, putting her hand on Bianca's arm.

"I will not."

"Have you got it?"

"I will not tell you."

"Then you have got it?"

"I did not say so."

"No, but you didn't say you hadn't, and that proves you have," howled the old woman, in a perfect frenzy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Queredo, as he stuck his torch in the ground and danced around the room in his enjoyment of the controversy.

"Why should I give it to you, even if I have it?" asked Bianca, calmly. "That would hardly be common sense."

"Are you a thief, then, my nice young lady? I thought you had too much pride to steal anything, especially from a helpless old woman like poor Mother Bess."

There was something so exquisitely enjoyable in this bit of irony that Queredo actually rolled on the floor as he indulged in a boisterous fit of laughing.

Bianca's face flushed hotly at the old woman's words.

To be called a thief!

It was a word that had never been applied to her before, and it stung her to the quick.

Was she a thief in retaining possession of this weapon?

"No! I am not a thief!" she cried. "I have the knife, it is true, but it was lawfully captured by me in trying to escape from this den, and is therefore a fair spoil of war."

"That's fine talk, dearie, but I'll make you give it up, anyhow."

"Will you? Then, take it from me!" said Bianca, as, with all the fighting spirit of her father burning in her bosom, she placed her back against the opposite wall and awaited an attack.

"Oho! So you confess you have the knife, do you?" said Mother Bess.

"Yes, and here it is!" was the defiant reply.

Bianca drew the knife from her dress and flourished it before the old woman's eyes.

Mother Bess was in an uncontrollable rage.

"Give me that knife!"

"I will not!"

"Give it to me, or I will kill you where you stand!"

"Come and take it!"

"I will!"

With an activity surprising in an old woman, Mother Bess flew at Bianca and seized the girl's right hand, in which gleamed the knife.

Bianca threw the old woman to the ground with an effort, and replaced the knife in her dress.

Crash!

The dwarf had hurled himself at Bianca bodily and borne her to the earth.

At almost the same instant Queredo received a violent kick in the ribs from Gila Jim's heavy boot, as that worthy said:

"You imp! What are you and that old devilskin of a Mother Bess doing with this girl? Help her to her feet and come along yourself."

The dwarf sullenly arose, and would have given his hand to Bianca, but she turned from him with loathing as she sprung to her feet and stood looking at Gila Jim, awaiting his next command.

"We are ready to start now," he said, "and if I see any treachery on your part while we are working this job, I'll shoot you down as quickly as if you were a man. You understand?"

"I hear you," returned Bianca, haughtily.

"Good! Then, come along."

"Make her give me my knife first, Cap," whimpers the old woman.

"Shut up!" commanded Gila Jim, hardly noticing what Mother Bess said.

The bag shrugged her shoulders and turned toward the shelf where she kept the whisky bottle and sought solace in a long pull at the liquor.

"Mother Bess, you will remain in charge of the camp. We shall be away for several hours—perhaps days. Close up the entrance and keep everything snug here. Perhaps we may have a nicer place for you before long, if this job comes out all right," said Gila Jim.

"All right, captain. I'll take care of everything, trust Mother Bess," adding under her breath, "But I wish he would make that girl give me my knife. Never mind, I'll get even with her some day. I'll get my knife and carve the red cross on her back, just for fun."

The evil glance Mother Bess bestowed on Bianca proved that she meant what she said, and that the young girl would indeed be roughly used if she ever found herself completely in the power of the old woman.

"Now, Queredo, march!" said Gila Jim. "Got your guns?"

The dwarf produced a Winchester and showed that he also had a pair of six-shooters and a bowie, while a cartridge-belt encircled his waist—or rather the place where his waist would have been if he had had any ordinary human shape.

Without another word, Gila Jim led Bianca to the outlet of the camp, and using the improvised raft on which he had brought the girl from shore some hours before, put her on it again, and ferried her across the stream.

It was pitch dark, the trees along the edge of the river making a black pall that shut off every vestige of light.

"Queredo, light up for a minute," said Gila Jim, as the raft touched the shore.

The dwarf plunged into the thicket, and the wonderful stream of light that had flashed in Bianca's face when she stood at the entrance to the camp—and which, it will be remembered

was seen by the Giant Horseman—illuminated the spot on which they stood.

Bianca started as she saw that all the members of the Red Cross Gang were standing silently around her, each with his horse, fully accoutered, by his side.

A splendid bay, with a lady's saddle on his back, pawed impatiently at the ground in the midst of the group.

"Mount!" said Gila Jim, briefly, as he took Bianca's hand and led her to the bay.

She leaped lightly into the saddle, and as she did so, the noble animal, obeying a sign that she gave almost involuntarily, burst out of the group and dashed for liberty for his rider.

He had hardly reached the outskirts of the thicket however, when he was brought to a sudden halt, as Queredo's hoarse laugh rang out on the night air.

At the same instant, the light went out.

Bianca bent down and tried to strike at the dwarf's head with the knife that she still retained, but he was too active, and easily warded her blows.

"Another break like that, and I'll tie your hands behind you," hissed Gila Jim, as he reached her side.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the dwarf.

"Queredo, get your horse and come along. We have wasted too much time already."

With Bianca in their midst, Gila Jim and the dwarf on either side of her, the Red Cross Gang rode quietly but swiftly toward Mezuto City.

Turning off before they reached the beginning of the main street, they found themselves at the foot of the mountain and near the secret entrance to the Giant Horseman's abode.

"Now, girl; you know what we want you to do, I suppose, don't you?" said Gila Jim.

"What?"

"Why, to show us the way in here. We want to have a little conversation with your father in reference to the transfer of some real estate. See?"

"And you expect me to betray my father?"

"Call it what you like. We expect you to show us the way into that mine. I don't know whether it belongs to your father or not. I don't believe it does. Anyhow, I want to see the papers that give him the ownership."

"I will never help you to rob and murder my father."

"Oh, say, cheese this!" put in Bill Scruggins. "What's the use of lally-gagging with a durned fool like that? Guess we can find a way to open that door, wherever it is, without her help. Anyway, we don't want to stop here, talking, where the first man that comes loafing out of Mezuto is liable to find the whole convention of us and raise the town about our ears."

"There's sense in that," agreed Gila Jim, with a thoughtful nod. "Where can we go, Queredo, to talk this thing over? You know these mountains pretty well."

Queredo turned his horse short around, and, leading his companions past a clump of bushes that grew a little way up the mountain-side, revealed a narrow pass, that ran zig-zag until it ended in a natural recess covered by heavy masses of rock; while in the center of the roof was one large flat stone, that, though evidently put there by nature, might have been the work of man, so exactly true and square were its outlines.

"Now, my girl," said Gila Jim, as he glanced approvingly around at the sides of the natural chamber in which they found themselves, "we are in a quiet place, where we can talk without danger of interruption. We mean to get into that mine. When your father and that infernal Yankee got me in there they should have made sure that we couldn't get out. It was too good a thing to be given away to Gila Jim unless they were going to hang him off-hand."

"Which they should have done," said the girl, with bitter scorn.

"Precisely. But with a reprehensible dilatoriness, they hesitated to avail themselves of the privilege that was so opportunely placed in their hands by a series of beneficent happenings, that do not often obtrude themselves into the—the—"

"Oh, let up on your dictionary talk, Sandy," interrupted Bill Scruggins. "That don't help things any."

Sandy, who had been floundering in a mud-pool of big words, but who hoped to get out eventually, was very indignant at the interruption, especially when he heard Queredo snickering in a corner. He would probably have replied in a heated manner, but Gila Jim went on:

"You may as well give up the secret, girl, because we are bound to find it out. Anyhow, we can get in by way of the upper entrance, where Sandy dropped the flat rock and shut you all in."

"Why don't you go that way, then?" asked Bianca, with a slight smile.

"And be shot down one by one as we dropped in, eh?" said Gila Jim. "Oh, no, that's too good a cover for the parties inside."

"You're right there, Cap," put in Sandy.

"You will never find out the secret of the other door from me," said Bianca, drawing her-

self up, "so you may as well know that you're wasting your time, trying to force it from me."

"Curse you!" howled Gila Jim, "I will have it from you somehow!"

He had gradually been working himself up into a fury while talking and could not contain himself any longer.

The girl's cool disdain of him and his threats had fired him to a white heat.

Fearless as she was beautiful, it seemed as if nothing he could say could quell her proud spirit.

"You say you will have it from me somehow. I should like to know how you will obtain it. I do not think it lies within the power of a horse-thief, a bank-robber and the betrayer of his own brother, to do it!" replied Bianca, every word of her sarcastic speech cutting deeply into the desperado's heart.

With an oath, Gila Jim leveled a revolver at the girl and fired!

Bill Scruggins threw up the weapon at the moment, or the high-spirited girl would have been stretched at his feet a corpse.

"What are you doing, Cap? We can't afford that, just yet," said Bill. "Let's get that secret from her first, and then blaze away at her all you want. I'm agreeable, I'm sure."

Gila Jim sullenly thrust his revolver into his belt and folded his arms, as he looked at the still defiant girl, who smiled coolly in his face.

Then he gnashed his teeth with rage, as he suddenly seized her by the arm and forced her to her knees.

"I'll thrash it out of you!" he hissed, as he raised his heavy black-jack riding-whip.

Before he could bring it down, a powerful hand seized him resistlessly by the throat and hurled him to the ground, where a foot that seemed to weigh about a ton, held him securely.

The Giant Horseman!

CHAPTER XVII.

GILA JIM'S OATH.

ALL was confusion.

Gila Jim was lying helpless under the feet of the Giant Horseman, and the rest of the band, with the exception of Queredo, were covered by the revolvers of Fernandez, Sam Horton, Josh White, and the fussy little sheriff.

"In the name of the (hic!) law, I, Sheriff of Cordova County, (hic!) command you all to surrender forthwith (hic!) and to deliver your (hic!) weapons!" proclaimed the sheriff, with drunken solemnity, as his pistols waved about in front of Sandy and Bill Scruggins, as if he hadn't quite made up his mind whereabouts in their bodies he would plant his bullets.

"Well done, Fernandez; you fixed the business that time," said Josh White. "Drop that gun, you blackguard!" he added, as one of the men he was covering put his hand to a pistol in his belt.

"Bianca, my daughter, disarm them," said the Giant Horseman.

"Yes, father."

The girl, commencing with Sandy, who scowled at her evilly, took the pistols, guns and knives from the gang one by one, and threw them in a corner behind her father.

The horses of the gang and those of Josh White, Sam Horton and the sheriff were consorting in a friendly manner, but Nelo, as he became his proud spirit, held himself aloof and stood behind his master, watching the progress of events with an interest that was almost human in its intelligence.

"Don't much like it, do you, Gila Jim?" asked Josh, looking down at the fallen desperado, as Bianca took his weapons away from him.

"Curse you! I'll be even with you yet. It's your deal now, but I'll hold the cards again, and then, look out, all of you!"

"Gently, Sam! Hold on! Talk is cheap! Don't get excited!" said Josh White, as the young cowboy jumped forward to grasp Gila Jim by the throat.

"I can hardly keep my hands off him when I think of all I owe him," said Sam. "It's all well enough to tell me not to get excited, I can't help it, I tell you!"

"Yes, I know, Sam; it is pretty tough; but you must learn to control yourself. You can't milk the cows before you get them to the meadow," as we used to say in old Vermont."

"What are we going to do with these fellows, Josh?" asked Sam. "Surely we can prevent any of them getting away again."

"Well, you (hic) bet we can, young (hic) man!" said the fussy little sheriff with dignity. "I am the Sheriff of (hic) Cordova County, and I have a nice new (hic) jail in Mezuto City that has (hic) never been used yet, with ten cells for (hic) just such people as (hic) these here scoundrels!"

"Have you got any handcuffs, sheriff?" asked Josh White, with a business-like air.

The sheriff felt in all his pockets, and finally drew forth four pairs of bright steel handcuffs, which he held up with some degree of pride.

"They are (hic) new, my boy, like (hic) the sheriff and the (hic) jail! We will soon fix them up all right (hic). I'm just itching (hic) to try that new jail!"

"Keep your weapons ready, boys; in case of

my monkey business," said Josh, "while I put the bracelets on them as far as they go. I have two pairs of handcuffs in my own pocket. I got into the habit of carrying them when I joined the force in old Vermount, and I've never been without them since."

He stooped and handcuffed Gila Jim, who was still under the foot of the Giant Horseman.

"You have a knack of slipping these things, Gila Jim, I know, so you must excuse me putting them on rather tight."

"Shut your mouth! Your infernal chatter is worse than you handcuffs," growled Gila Jim, as the steel handcuffs were clasped so tightly around his wrists as to almost cut the skin.

"You are not over-polite, Gila. Gentlemen don't talk that way in old Vermount."

"Then thank the gods this is Arizona!" interjected Jim.

"Yes, and you shall (hic!) have a nice fresh dose of (hic!) Arizona justice," said the sheriff, with a husky laugh.

"There, Gila Jim, I don't think you will slip those very easily," said Josh, as he arose to his feet.

"Don't you?" muttered Jim to himself. "We shall see!"

The desperado had been handcuffed before, and had now practiced a trick pretty well known to criminals. He had, by a strong effort, held his hands in such a position that, though the handcuffs seemed to fit tightly, they were really put on so loosely that, with his small hand, he would be able to slip them, should it be worth his while.

"Let's see! Three pairs of handcuffs left and six gentlemen to be secured. All we can do is to arrange them in a line and hitch them together. Eh, Fernandez; isn't that the only way?"

"Si, señor."

"Come on then, gentlemen. Put out your paws. Sandy, I'll commence with you," said Josh White.

"I enter my solemn protest against this unconscionable indignity. I do not comprehend by what process of ratioemation you have arrived at the illogical conclusion that I have offended against the statutes of Arizona!" said Sandy.

"That's all right, Sandy. You shall go in the sheriff's nice new jail and have a dictionary to read in your cell. That will fix you comfortably. It is more than they would do for you in old Vermount."

The six men were soon handcuffed together, and the sheriff looked complacently up and down the line like a general in reviewing his troops.

The Giant Horseman had allowed Gila Jim to arise, but was watching him closely.

"Look out!" suddenly cried Sam Horton.

There was a loud beating of hoofs and a cloud of dust, as all the horses—those of the gang as well as of their captors—stampeded and dashed down the pass.

Seated on the bay that had been ridden by Bianca was Queredo, urging on the frightened animals by repeated blows of a lariat that he held twisted in his hand, and laughing in his screeching, demoniacal way, as he saw how thoroughly he had captured the whole group of horses.

"Quit that, Gila Jim, or I'll put a bullet through you!" thundered Josh White, as the desperado made a nervous movement as if to escape.

The cowboy fired a shot after Queredo; but the dwarf seemed to bear a charmed life, and his only acknowledgment of the shot was to laugh louder than ever.

The Giant Horseman whistled in a peculiar manner, and Nebo, who had not joined in the stampede, put his nose over his master's shoulder.

A few whispered words to the noble creature from his master, and Nebo galloped down the pass after Queredo and the flying herd.

"What is the idea in that, Fernandez? You have let Nebo go, too, eh?" said Josh White, in some astonishment.

"Si, señor."

"But what for?"

"Yes (hic!) That's what's the matter (hic!) What for?" added the sheriff.

"I suppose you have some good reason for what you do, Fernandez. You generally have, I notice," said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"I hate to lose all that cattle, too. We should have the whole county up in arms over such a wholesale steal as that if it was in old Vermount."

"We shall get them back, señor."

"We shall?"

"Si, señor."

"How?"

"Nebo will do what is necessary, señor."

"Umph!"

"What are we going to do with all these guns? We can't carry them along with us, besides our own," said the cowboy.

"That's true," assented Josh White. "Curse that crooked dwarf, with his big head and croaking laugh. If we had the horses, we should be all right. Hope Nebo will do as well as you say he

will, Fernandez. You think we can depend upon him, eh?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, all we can do is to leave the weapons where they are until we can come back for them. They are under cover anyhow. They won't have a chance to get rusty before we get back."

"They are a pretty nice (hic!) collection, too," said the sheriff. "They are all forfeited to the (hic!) county if we secure a (hic!) conviction. So I'll take charge of (hic!) them when we get the prisoners to jail."

"Fall into line here! Sandy, you are on the end, so you will have to go first. I guess there is no doubt about the others following you," said Josh White, as he examined the handcuffs to see that all were secure.

"Good joke (hic!) Darned good joke!" said the fussy little sheriff. "I guess they will (hic!) all go along, sure enough."

"Gila Jim, you will walk behind, and I will travel on one side, and your brother, Sam Horton, on the other."

"My brother!" muttered Gila Jim, contemptuously.

"Ah, I don't wonder you object to being reminded of your relationship, though I think, if I were Sam, I should hate it more than you do. You are not a very creditable member of any family, or at least so we should consider in old Vermount."

Gila Jim frowned darkly at this bantering, and raised his manacled hands as if he could strike Josh White with them.

"Put your hands down," said the young cowboy on the other side, as he seized Gila Jim's wrists, "or you will never get to jail alive."

"All right, brother!" sneered Gila Jim. "I do as you tell me, of course."

"You'd better," returned Sam Horton.

The Giant Horseman strode near the head of the procession on one side of the line, and the fussy little sheriff on the other.

The effects of the whisky and red pepper were gradually evaporating from the brain of the sheriff, but his dignity was as portentous as ever.

The prisoners were led without incident to the main street of Mezuto City.

The saloons were nearly all closed and there was no one on the street to note the arrival of the procession.

The jail, made of rough, unbewn pine logs, with heavily-larred windows and a massive iron-bound oak door, stood on the side of a hill at the back of the principal street.

A steep road led to the front entrance, and all the windows faced the town.

"There, isn't that a picture (hic!)?" asked the sheriff, admiringly, as they stood at the foot of the steep road and saw the new jail shining white in the moonlight.

"Nice-looking building," assented Josh White. "How are your own quarters? Pretty comfortable?"

"Oh, yes. I have a nice set of rooms in the north end of the building (hic!), with a yard dividing them from the cells."

"Are you a married man, sheriff?" asked Sam Horton.

The sheriff's countenance fell, as he turned toward the cowboy, and said, slowly and impressively:

"Young man, I am married, and you shall see my wife (hic!) She is of a very sociable disposition, and is a remarkably handy woman around a house (hic!) Moreover, she isn't scared of nothing."

"How about the horses, Fernandez?" said Josh White. "Do you think Nebo is all right?"

"Si, señor."

"I'd be glad to see the horses, nevertheless," put in Sam Horton, with a ring of incredulity in his voice.

"Listen then," said the Giant Horseman.

A faint clatter of hoofs could be heard, which became louder every minute.

"They're coming, by gosh!" said Josh White, joyfully.

"Here they are," added Sam Horton.

The three horses of Josh White, Sam Horton and the sheriff, together with the bay on which they had seen Queredo when the stampede occurred came trotting up to the group, with Nebo's gigantic form overshadowing them in the rear.

"Nebo was all right, after all, Fernandez," said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"Well, they can follow us. We must get these fellows into jail before we look after the horses," said the sheriff.

They had by this time reached the massive front gate, and the sheriff rang a bell that clang'd loudly in the interior of the building.

"Who is there?" asked a female voice, as a little iron grating in the door was opened.

"The sheriff."

"Oh, the sheriff, is it?" said the female voice. "And what has the sheriff come for? Why didn't the sheriff stay out all night? It is a pity he has come home at all! The sheriff ought to be ashamed of himself, leaving his poor wife all alone in a great dismal jail all night. If he was a man at all, he wouldn't do it."

The female voice said this very fast and in a

loud key, and the little sheriff trembled as he listened.

"That's my wife. That's Mrs. Bunter, and she's on her ear, as sure as shooting!" said the sheriff, confidentially, to Josh White.

The gate was open, and Mrs. Bunter, a large, fat, good-natured looking woman, but who was evidently out of humor just now, stood in the doorway.

When she saw the prisoners she started back in astonishment.

"Why, what on earth have you got there, sheriff?" she asked.

"Very important capture, my dear. The Red Cross Gang of horse-thieves. Had a desperate fight, but we got them here. Give me the keys."

Mrs. Bunter handed the keys to the sheriff and everybody stepped inside the gate.

"That's all right. Safe at last, boys," said the sheriff, exultantly, as he turned to lock the gate.

Before he could quite close the ponderous oak gate, he was seized by the collar and dashed to one side, as a man darted through the narrow opening.

Five shots rang out, but the bullets were only flattened against the caken door, while Gila Jim who had slipped out of his handcuffs was riding at breakneck speed down the slope on the back of Nebo.

When he reached the bottom he turned and shook his fist at the jail as he muttered:

"You are three to one, but the fight shall be settled before sundown! Gila Jim swears it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEBO PLAYS A TRICK ON QUEREDO.

Queredo laughed sardonically when he succeeded in so dexterously stampeding the horses, and escaping from the spot where his companions had been captured by the Giant Horseman and his friends.

While the others had been parleying, his movements had been unwatched, and he had taken advantage of the fact to do a stroke of business that he considered was quite worthy of his own shrewdness.

Though unable to utter articulate sounds, the dwarf could shriek and laugh in his unearthly way, and thus keep the horses on the full gallop.

He made straight for the thicket that surrounded Camp No. 1.

Once get the horses into camp and he would feel safe!

As to his companions, he could seek some means of helping them afterward.

Queredo had every faith in his own abilities, and did not doubt for an instant that he could find some method of releasing them, especially with the assistance of his respected parent, Mother Bess.

He had covered about half the open space between the camp and the foot of the mountain with his herd, when he fancied he heard the sound of a galloping horse far behind him.

All Queredo's senses were singularly acute, as if nature had tried to recompense him as much as possible for the loss of speech, and as he bent his big head to one side his ears seemed to lengthen as he listened intently.

Yes; there was no mistake about it. He was pursued!

The thundering hoof-beats were coming nearer, and he would have to hurry if he meant to reach the camp first.

He was sitting curled up on the saddle of the bay horse on which the Giant Horseman's daughter had ridden away from the camp.

Queredo did not care about even riding a horse like an ordinary human being.

He preferred to assume all kinds of grotesque features, and perform equestrian feats of his own invention that would astonish any old circus rider.

When he heard that some one was riding after him he shrieked in his horrible fashion and stood up on the saddle of his horse as he tried to pierce the gloom behind him.

Nothing could he see, but the steady beating of the hoofs of his pursuer's horse was getting very plain.

He must increase his speed or he would be certainly overtaken before he reached camp.

The horses were all galloping in a lurch, starting forward with fresh efforts every time the dwarf uttered his demoniacal shrieks.

With a wild whoop, Queredo sprung from the back of his horse to that of another.

The startled animal lunged forward as if it had been spurred, throwing Queredo from his back in the midst of the flying hoofs of his companions that were kicking up the dust in clouds and making the whole procession like a ghostly cavalcade seen mistily in a dream or distempered imagination.

Queredo dropped to the ground in a confusion of iron-bound heels.

As he fell he clutched wildly at anything that might save him.

His fingers closed around part of the tail of the horse that had thrown him, and he held to it with a death-grip tenacity.

The knees of the horse immediately behind

The Giant Horseman.

struck the dwarf's back, and his big head was covered with foam and dust.

Queredo did not laugh now.

For once in his life he found himself in too serious a position for the indulgence of his risible propensities.

If he could have spoken he would have yelled himself hoarse with profanity.

As it was he could only rave and curse mentally.

He did this with a heartiness worthy of a better occupant.

Still the horses dashed along and still, in spite of his fearful predicament, the dwarf could hear the pursuing steed, coming along after him, as relentless as fate, in the gloom.

How tightly he held to the handful of horsehair that was his only hope.

Sometimes the horse's hoofs would almost strike him, as he was dragged along.

Queredo began to think that his time had come and that he had only escaped captivity to be crushed to a jelly in his efforts to escape.

He must get out of this fix in some way.

As has been said before, Queredo's agility was something remarkable.

He noticed that at every jump made by the horse he was lifted clear of the ground and thrown up, only to be dashed down the next instant.

If he could only put a little more spring into his own limbs when the horse jerked him up, might he not yet regain the back of his steed?

At least he would try.

A large stone lay in the way, and the horse, in clearing it, threw Queredo higher than usual.

The dwarf gathered himself for an effort at the same moment, and when the horse lifted him threw his feet out behind.

They caught in something, and Queredo was no longer among the flying iron-bound hoofs.

The dwarf could not look behind him, but he knew that his heels were entangled in the bridle of the horse following.

Another convulsive wiggle and the dwarf managed to get his arms around the animal's neck.

It was not the horse that had thrown him, but Queredo did not care for that as long as he got away from the dangerous hoofs and dust below.

One more struggle and Queredo was safely sitting in the saddle.

The pursuing horse was very near now, and the dwarf could just distinguish a large shadow in the thick gloom in the rear.

What did he see?

The Giant Horse!

The animal was riderless, but was carrying itself in the indescribable, but unmistakable manner of a well-trained steed guided by an accomplished horseman!

The Giant Horse was carrying an invisible rider!

Nebo's bridle was lying on his neck, but Queredo could see in the dim light from the few stars in the heavens that the bridle tightened when some inequality in the ground made the aid of a master's hand necessary to assist the horse, and that Nebo was being guided in his course by some mysterious agent beyond the comprehension of the dwarf.

Queredo stood up in his saddle and leaped from one horse to another until he was finally implanted on the back of the last of his herd.

There he stood and tried to penetrate the mystery of the riderless horse that was yet evidently not riderless!

What could it mean?

The hair on Queredo's large head stood on end until it looked like a very hideous porcupine that had somehow taken on an abnormal shape entirely unlike its species.

Queredo was not a very handsome individual at any time, but he looked now worse than ever.

The Giant Horse was now so near that the dwarf could plainly hear his breathing above the sound of the hoof-beats of all the horses that were dashing toward the thicket.

The large eyes of Nebo flashed with unwonted fire, and Queredo thought he could see a gleam of fire streaming from them.

What could be the meaning of this extraordinary apparition?

Was it a ghostly horse that was pursuing him so relentlessly, and would the invisible rider after a while take on the form of the terrible Giant Horseman?

It was a peculiarity of the gigantic individual whom we know as Fernandez, that he always inspired an awe-stricken respect on the part of everybody by his mere presence.

Even Queredo, who—whatever his faults and villainies—at least possessed the one quality of courage, could not resist the influence wielded by the Giant Horseman.

When away from him, Queredo would pretend that he did not fear him, but as soon as circumstances brought Fernandez into his vicinity, the dwarf yielded the allegiance that the Giant Horseman compelled from all with whom he came in contact.

Even now, when the dwarf, who did not believe in anything, heavenly or terrestrial, and who had not an atom of veneration in his entire composition, was almost cowed by the simple

suspicion that the Giant Horseman might be an invisible shape on the back of Nebo, the power of this mysterious man was unmistakably shown.

Instead of dashing right into the horses that Queredo was still urging to their utmost speed, Nebo suddenly swerved to the right, apparently in obedience to the tightening of the rein on that side.

The dwarf noticed, with a thrill of horror, as the great horse swept by, that the stirrup-leathers were drawn tight, as if a heavy foot were in the empty stirrup, and he fancied that he could even see the red marks of spurs spring into view on Nebo's flanks, as if his invisible rider were touching him with the sharp spikes in the endeavor to quicken his pace.

What could this terrible presence forebode?

Queredo leaped from one horse to another, so as to keep as near to Nebo as possible, as the great horse moved toward the thicket, as if to head off the dwarf and the horses he was guiding.

What would be the end of the adventure?

The dwarf could see plainly enough that he was not to be permitted to take his horses into camp without an encounter of some kind.

Worse than all, he was to be opposed by a mysterious power that was evidently not of this world.

Nebo was moving along with an easy stride that yet carried him ahead of the other horses, that were panting and straining themselves to the utmost to reach the thicket first.

Queredo drew a pistol, and desperately resolved to put a bullet into the body of the giant horse.

Perhaps solid leaden bullets would be too much even for a supernatural horse.

But some influence that he could not define restrained him, and he put his pistol back into its place in his belt.

He could not shoot the Giant Horse.

Neto was now in front of him, and to reach the camp Queredo and his horses would have to pass the Giant Horse and his terrible invisible rider.

Queredo made up his mind to a bold move!

Planting himself firmly on the back of a horse in the middle of the group, Queredo broke out into a series of shrieks that made all the horses increase their speed to the utmost tension.

Nebo, however, without any apparent effort, galloped a little faster, and kept what were now his pursuers just behind him.

Queredo ground his teeth with rage!

Taking a lariat that was coiled on the saddle of the horse he rode, he dexterously let it out and struck each horse in turn.

The result was a slight increase in speed, but the Giant Horse, with a disdainful toss of the head, kept at the same relative distance.

Then the dwarf tried another trick!

He must get rid of this fearful animal and his mysterious rider somehow!

With a puckering of his lips that gave him the appearance of being in mortal agony, he emitted a shrill whistle.

As if they had been electrified, every horse in the herd stopped short.

Queredo chuckled.

Then he stopped chuckling and frowned in dismay.

The reins on Nebo's neck tightened, and the Giant Horse threw himself back on his haunches in obedience to the signal.

Queredo felt himself doomed.

See! What was this?

The Giant Horseman was coming straight toward him with mischief in his looks.

The noble animal's mane and tail were waving, as he shook himself, as if preparing for a desperate charge!

Queredo, from his position on the saddle of his horse, could note every threatening movement of the tremendous animal that was bearing down on him.

The dwarf could not move!

He seemed to be paralyzed in every limb!

Like a resistless avalanche, the Giant Horse and his invisible rider swept toward him!

There was a crash, as Nebo's powerful chest struck the foremost horse in the herd!

The invisible rider was forcing his horse straight toward the trembling dwarf, regardless of all obstacles in his way.

Onward came the Giant Horse until his hot breath scorched Queredo's face.

Raising his head high in the air, Nebo suddenly seized the dwarf in his teeth by the back of his coat and flung him far over the crowd of horses to the ground, where he lay stunned and bleeding.

Then Nebo, galloping up and down, turned the horses around, and with a wild neigh, started them back toward Mezuto City.

How Nebo and the horses arrived at the jail, and how Gila Jim made his escape on the back of the Giant Horse afterward, we already know.

We will return to Queredo in a subsequent chapter.

tors were on the alert to prevent their taking advantage of any confusion to get away too.

The sheriff was experienced enough to know that it was no use trying to stop a man who had got away with all the odds in his favor, and he did not attempt any useless pursuit.

Fernandez knew it too.

There was not another horse in the whole of Arizona that could catch Nebo when he chose to put out his full powers of speed.

Though the Giant Horse was so thoroughly under his master's control that a word or a whistle would make him do the bidding of Fernandez, the horse was too well trained not to yield obedience to so experienced a horseman as Gila Jim.

Fernandez, by a mechanical contrivance of his own invention, had so arranged the bridle and stirrup-leathers on Nebo, that even when he was riderless, the guiding-reins were drawn sufficiently to give the horse the supporting sensation that he would receive from a man on his back. This contrivance it was, added to Queredo's natural superstitious dread, that made the dwarf imagine Nebo to be directed by an invisible rider when the great horse succeeded in turning the stolen horses back to their rightful owners.

"He has Nebo, and we can do nothing at present," said the Giant Horseman resignedly, as the jail gates were closed and locked by the sheriff.

"And has that scoundrel really got away again?" said Sam Horton, as his steel-blue eyes sparkled with indignation.

"Only for a time, señor," said Bianca with a smile, as she looked into the young cowboy's face. "My father has made up his mind to put that man in a Chicago prison, and Gila Jim will find that that means capture or death. Do I speak correctly, father?"

"Si, my daughter."

"Keep cool, Sam," admonished Josh White. "It is the best thing you can do under the circumstances. It was one of the first lessons I learned at school down in old Vermont."

"Old Vermont!" grumbled Sam Horton to himself under his breath. "What with Josh White's 'old Vermont' and the Giant Horseman's 'Si, señor,' I get as nervous as a kitten sometimes. Wish I could be cool; but I can't until I have wiped out old scores with Gila Jim. Then I'll be cool enough, and not before. Curse him—even if he is my brother."

"Well, gentlemen, suppose we get these fellows into their cells," said the fussy little sheriff. "Then we can talk over our next proceedings. Bring me the keys, my dear," to Mrs. Bunter, who was so surprised at the appearance of the prisoners and their captors that she could hardly speak.

Mrs. Bunter went after the keys, and the sheriff, with the assistance of his three friends, soon had the prisoners locked up in separate cells.

"We have the latest and most improved cell fastenings here, you see," said the sheriff, pointing to the doors of the cells with honest pride.

"Well, you'll need 'em," growled Bill Scruggins, who was scowling through the larded door of his cell and listening to the sheriff's remarks.

"What's that?" asked the sheriff, sharply.

"Nothing."

"He says you will need good fastenings to keep the Red Cross Gang inside," said Josh White, who liked to tease the fussy little sheriff for the sake of hearing him talk.

"The Red Cross Gang, eh?" said the sheriff.

"Well, I think Cordona county jail is strong enough to keep the Red Cross or any other gang safe inside, and to keep the whole State outside if necessary."

"Oh, give us a rest," muttered Bill Scruggins, as he turned away, with a disgusted expression on his face.

"You see," went on the sheriff, "here is a long bar that works with a lever and fastens all the doors in a tier of cells at one movement. They have the arrangement in nearly all prisons in the East now, but I have it for the first time in Arizona."

"Excellent!" said Fernandez.

"Yes, I don't think it is to bad," acquiesced the sheriff. "We are obliged to take every precaution, but I never had a person escape from my care yet."

"Didn't you indeed," put in his wife, who had just returned with the keys, with which the sheriff proceeded to lock each cell door, to make assurance doubly sure.

"No, my dear; you know I never did."

"I guess you are right, Sheriff Bunter."

"Guess I am," with a solemn shake of the head.

"But how long have you been sheriff, Mr. Bunter?" continued his wife, mischievously.

"What's that?"

"You heard what I said."

"Well, never mind. The prisoners are all right now. Can't you get us up something to eat while I look after the horses? Take the young lady with you, my dear, and we'll come along in a few minutes."

"But you didn't answer my question!"

"What?"

CHAPTER XIX.

WHY THE JAIL DOOR WAS MADE SO STRONG.
The escape of Gila Jim from the jail caused a flutter among the other prisoners, but their cap-

"How long have you been sheriff?"
"Oh, never mind," said the sheriff, who for some reason did not wish to prolong the discussion.

"You make me sick," went on the irrepressible Mrs. Bunter. "You have been sheriff just a month and you never had a prisoner under your charge before to-day, and yet you are boasting that you never had a prisoner escape. I hate a blowhard, and that's all you are, Mr. Bunter."

The poor little sheriff looked very crestfallen, as his wife, with a triumphant smile, beckoned to Bianca, and retired to the house.

"She is what we'd call a little severe down in old Varmount," said Josh White, with an amused smile.

"Deuced severe," chimed in Sam Horton, laughing aloud. "What do you think of it, Señor Fernandez?"

"Si, señor." The little sheriff swore desperately at the horses as he turned them toward the rear of the yard, but did not reply to the remarks of his companions.

Half an hour later the party were seated at a table in the sheriff's own dining-room, doing hearty justice to a hastily-prepared, but dainty repast, that Mrs. Bunter, with the aid of a stout Irish girl who was her sole-assistant in the kitchen, had managed to bring into existence.

"What are you going to do with the prisoners?" asked Josh White, of the sheriff, as, at the conclusion of the meal, the four men walked toward the jail part of the building again.

"Well, I hardly know yet. You see we arrested them with a number of stolen horses in their possession, and we shall not have any difficulty in making out a case against them."

"I should think not, the scoundrels!" put in Sam Horton, indignantly.

"Keep cool, Sam!" warned Josh.

"You hold a warrant for Gila Jim yourself, don't you?" continued the sheriff.

"Yes."

"Good; but then, we haven't got Gila Jim at the present moment."

"But we soon will have him, you can bet. Eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor." "However, as I said before, we can hold the prisoners we've got easily enough. We must wait until some of the horses are identified. Then we will turn the prisoners over to the penitentiary in very short order, I'm thinking."

"Well, sheriff, they are safe in your hands for the present anyhow. And now, I guess, Fernandez, you would like to be getting home to see that everything is safe before we start on a hunt for Gila Jim, eh?"

"Si, señor." "Father, when are we going home?" said Bianca, at this moment, as she joined the group.

"Now, my daughter."

"I wish the young lady would stay with me a day or two. I should be pleased to have her company," put in the jolly wife of the sheriff. Since Mr. Bunter has been living here it has been very lonesome for me, with no one but a fool to speak to."

"My dear," interrupted the sheriff. "Ain't you a little personal in your remarks? If I was such a fool I don't think I should have been elected Sheriff of Cordona County."

"Oh, men don't know a fool when they see one. It takes a wife to find that out."

The others only smiled at this interchange of connubial pleasantries. It was easy to see that, in spite of her caustic criticisms of her liege lord, the sheriff's wife was a good-natured woman, whose bark was a great deal worse than her bite.

"We will leave the horses that were used by the gang in your charge," said Josh White.

"All right."

"Unless you will lend us one for the use of the lady."

"I have an extra horse that she can have, and another for her father."

"How will you feel on an ordinary horse, Fernandez? It will be hard for you to ride on anything but Nebo, won't it?"

"Si, señor." The sheriff soon had the horses ready, and led them out into the yard behind the front door, with its iron bars and massive bolts.

"That is my own saddle, that they took off my poor Paquita and put on the bay. So I shall get part of my property, at all events," laughed Bianca.

"Here is your horse, Fernandez. Looks pretty small for you, eh?"

"Si, señor."

"Let us see how you look on it. Get up, Fernandez," said Josh White.

"I will not use it," said Fernandez. "I will recover Nebo before sundown."

"Will you? I'm glad you are so confident about it, Fernandez. Have you got your plans laid for getting your horse?"

"Si, señor."

"And Gila Jim, too?"

"Si, señor."

"Will you tell me what they are?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, tell me."

"When we reach home."

"Oí!"

"Darn his picture! With his 'Si, señor,' and his mysterious manner! I should like to know who and what this Giant Horseman is. He is a good fellow, of course, but his dignified style and his short words make me awfully weary," grumbled Sam Horton to himself.

"Well, sheriff, I hope we shall bring Gila Jim to you inside of twenty-four hours. Señor Fernandez says he can rope him in that time, and he is not a man to talk wild. So keep a nice comfortable cell for him, will you?" said Josh White, as he put his foot in his stirrup.

Sam Horton hastened to help Bianca into her saddle, but with a silvery little laugh, the young girl was seated before the cowboy could reach her, though the rich glow in her beautiful cheeks showed that she appreciated the young man's attentions.

"I should like to be going with you," said the sheriff.

"Would you? Well, you can't go. You have enough to attend to here. I suppose you would go and leave me here with all these horse-thieves and cut-throats to take care of, and no one in the house with me but Mary Ferguson, who is scared whenever she sees a pistol, and would have hysterics if she was told to hold a repeating rifle. A pretty man you are, Sheriff Bunter."

"But—my dear!"

"Oh, don't call me your dear. It was a sad day for me when you entered politics, and a worse one when I told you that I would take you for better or worse that day in the dear old farm-house on the Ohio."

"Devil take the old farm-house!" muttered the sheriff, desperately. "I have been hearing about that every day for the last ten years. I wish it would fall into the river, and float to perdition bottom-side up."

"What's that, Sheriff Bunter?"

"Nothing, my dear."

"Well, sheriff, if you will open the gate, I guess we'll march," said Josh White. "So you are going on foot until you get Nebo, eh, Fernandez? Is that the idea?"

"Si, señor."

"Well, I don't know that I blame you very much," was Josh White's response. "I believe I'd do the same thing myself if I owned a horse like Nebo. Open the door, sheriff."

The fussy little sheriff, with a great deal of importance, took down the two great iron bars that ran across the door at top and bottom, shot back the three massive bolts and turned the key in the huge lock.

"She moves rather heavily on her hinges yet," said the sheriff, as he slowly swung the door open.

"Put some grease on," suggested his wife, sententiously.

"Grease!" said the sheriff, contemptuously. "That's all women know! I mean, some women, of course," he added, hastily, bowing to Bianca. "What would be the use of grease? I want the door to move heavily. Do you think the principal door of a prison is like the screen-door of a saloon? Nice idea if it swung open without any effort. Nice thing for prisoners, but deucedly inconvenient for their keepers! No, this heavy door is all right. The jail is one of the best in the country all through, and the door is as good as the rest of the building, Mrs. Bunter."

The Giant Horseman had stepped outside during the foregoing disquisition by the sheriff.

"Listen! What's that?" he said, as he held up his right hand, warningly.

Every man's hand flew to his Winchester and Bianca grasped one of her pearl-handled revolvers.

They all knew that when the Giant Horseman scented danger their weapons might be needed at a moment's notice.

"What do you hear, Fernandez? Trouble?" asked Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"What is it?"

"Listen."

Everybody listened intently.

Then the sheriff, with a look of horror, said, as he hastily motioned to the others to go inside the jail:

"By heavens! It is the boys, and they are coming here!"

"A rescue?" asked Josh, with a frown, as he examined the lock of his Winchester.

"No, the other way," answered the sheriff, as he shot the bolts into their sockets, turned the massive key, and replaced the great iron bars on the oaken door. "It means a lynching."

"A lynching!"

"Yes, and that is one reason why the main door is made so strong," returned the sheriff, as he tried the fastenings to make sure that all were secure.

The tramp of horses on the main street of the town told that a party of horsemen were preparing for some expedition, while the references to the Red Cross Gang and the jail told all too surely of the nature of the expedition.

Though the gang had managed to keep themselves out of sight for so long, and while a number of its members had been supposed to be honest miners, who worked hard for a living and spent their money in a friendly way when they had any, the frequent loss of horses and other property gave the good citizens of Cordona county warning that the gang were operating secretly in the vicinity.

The gang had now been unearthed, and it was generally known in Mazuto City that six men with the fatal red cross cut into their backs were in the jail in charge of the fussy little sheriff, Tom Bunter.

The prisoners must die!
That was soon settled!

Moreover, the "boys" must have the pleasure of managing the details of the execution.

A meeting was hastily called in the saloon into which the reader has been taken twice before, and the surly landlord chosen chairman.

He called the assembly to order with two or three vigorous thumps on the bat with the handle of his bowie-knife.

"Feller-citizens," he commenced, "you all know why this hyar meetin' 'ez bin called. Don't yer?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" yelled a dozen voices.

"Very well, then, what's the use o' me shootin' off my mouth about it? We has bizness to do, and we'll do it. Ef there's any man hyar ez don't believe that the Red Cross Gang should be wiped out wherever it is found, let that man say so now, and give us his reasons for such a belief. I says, hang 'em, right away!"

This harangue was received with uprarious cheering, and the landlord, who evidently considered that he had made a neat speech, invited every one to take a drink in his enthusiasm.

"How about Tom Bunter?" said one. "He'll be apt to try and keep us out, won't he?"

"He be darned!" returned the surly landlord. "Let him keep us out if he can. We'll pull the durned old jail down over his head if he don't open that thar jail door when I tell him. Come on, boys! Let's get up the hill and settle this yar bizness right away. Thar's nothin' to wait for, ez I knows on. Is that?"

"No! Come on, boys! Come on!" chorused the crowd.

In a minute the saloon was empty!

The boys, every one with a piece of crape concealing the upper part of his face, mounted their horses that stood ready for action outside the saloon, and, under the leadership of the surly landlord, rode up and down the main street half a dozen times, to get themselves worked up into a fighting state of mind for the attack on the jail.

This was what caught the ear of the Giant Horseman, and warned him that there was trouble in the wind.

"Are yer all fixed?" yelled the surly landlord, as he flourished his own six-shooter and fired a shot into the air just to enliven matters in general.

"All ready! Lead on thar!" was the response from a man by his side.

"Yes! Lead on! Lead on! Get down to bizness," added several voices.

The surly landlord, who, with his black crape mask, looked a really terrible creature, flourished his revolver again, and, with a wild "Whoop!" turned his horse toward the hill that led to the jail.

His followers, all masked, and with revolvers ready, dashed after him.

The noise of their riding on the main street had woken everybody in Mazuto City, but those of the men who were not included in the lynching party were not inclined to interfere, while the women only lay and wondered what deviltry was in progress, and hoped that the noisy idlers would not take it into their heads to attack any of the houses just for fun.

There was no danger of this, however.

The chance to get their hands on half a dozen members of the Red Cross Gang was all the fun they wanted, and they were not disposed to get into mischief to the annoyance of peaceable citizens or helpless women!

As they dashed up the hill, yelling and firing occasionally, the crowd were fully determined that the half-dozen prisoners in the jail should decorate as many trees before morning broke.

"Looks all quiet in there, but I guess we will soon bring old Tom Bunter out," said the landlord, with an oath.

"I bet be's watchin' us from somewhere inside his old jail," said another.

"Like enough!" assented the surly landlord, as he reined up in front of the massive oaken door.

The rest of the party gathered around him, and listened intently for any sound within.

All was quiet.

"You're sure ez how them fellers are in thar, ain't yer?" asked one of the masked men of the leader.

"Sure?" echoed the surly landlord. "You bet yer boots I'm sure! I had it from Bob Look."

CHAPTER XX.

THE LYNCHING PARTY.

THAT the "boys" were coming up from Mazuto City to the jail was an undoubted fact.

The Giant Horseman's quick ear had caught the sounds of disturbance first, but now they could be heard plainly by all in the jail.

ins, over thar, 'n' be see them taken in. 'Sides, war'n't ther sheriff down to my saloon last night an' warn't that Yankee chap a-settin' 'em up, an' didn't ther sheriff get full, and warn't they goin' after the gang, and didn't that thar big feller what they calls Fernandez hev a pretty cute idee whar they war, even then? Wal, now, you kin bet I'm sure!" And the surly landlord looked around as if he would like to see the man that would dare contradict him.

"Wal, that's enough chin. Just call out to Tom Bunter cz we want ter git in," said another of the party. "We can't afford ter stand out hyar all night doin' nothin'!"

Thus reminded, the surly landlord rode up to the door and hammered on the wood with the butt of his heavy six-shooter.

No answer.

"Give it to him ag'in," said the man who had before expressed impatience.

Bang, bang, bang, went the revolver on the door again.

Still no answer!

The people inside were evidently trying to gain time for some purpose.

They must have heard the noise, unless they were very, very fast asleep or dead.

The crowd outside listened intently for the least sign that the inmates of the jail heard them.

"This is too thin," declared the surly landlord. "Yer can't tell me cz them fellers in thar don't hear me. I'll givo 'em one more chance, and then, down goes that door. Eh, boys; what'd ye say?"

"Yes, break down thar durned door—break it down!"

The surly landlord hammered with all his might on the door, until the racket could be heard a mile away.

"Hallo! Hallo there! What's the matter out there?" asked the voice of Tom Bunter, as the little grating in the door was pushed aside and revealed the face of the sheriff behind the bars. "What are you making all this noise about?"

"See hyar, sheriff. You've got some men in thar ez we want," said the surly landlord, keeping his mask well down over his face with his left hand as he spoke.

"What men do you mean?" asked the sheriff.

"You know what men we mean—them thar Red Cross Gang fellers."

"Red Cross Gang fellers?" repeated the sheriff, innocently.

"Oh, cheese that thar!" broke in the impatient gentleman above referred to. "Open that thar door, Tom Bunter, and we'll soon show you the men we're talking about."

"Open the door, did you say?"

"Yes; open that thar door."

"Couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't admit visitors to the jail at four o'clock in the morning. You'll have to get an order from the Judge of the Criminal Court and bring it here at 2 P. M. Then I'll see about letting you in. Good-night, gentlemen."

"Hold on thar, sheriff," said the surly landlord, as Tom Bunter was about to close the little grating through which he had been quietly counting the number of men outside and calculating his means of resistance.

"Well, what do you want?" asked the sheriff.

"Are you goin' to let us in thar? That's all I want ter know."

"I guess not."

"Wal, we mean to get in somehow."

"Do you? As how?"

"We'll soon show yer that, ef we once make a start. We want them thar men, and we're goin' to have 'em."

"What would you do with them if you did have them?"

"Nothin' pertickler. Just givo 'em a little surprise party, that's all. Eh, boys?" turning to his companions.

"Yes, that's all, sheriff."

"Oh, that's all, is it, boys?" returned the sheriff, ironically. "That's reasonable, I'm sure. Well, now, listen to me. In the first place, I don't say that I have any prisoners here. It isn't your business to know. You've elected me Sheriff of Cordona County, and by the ghost of Julius Caesar, I'm going to do my duty and show you that you elected a man as wasn't to be scared by anybody—not even by his friends. Let me tell you, boys, another thing. In spite of those black things over your faces, I know every one of you, and could call you all by name if I wanted to. You will break into this building at your peril. It belongs to Cordona county, and was built with the people's money. I am armed, and I have a dozen men standing by my side now, who are armed, too, and who will help me to defend my building and my prisoners. Now, go ahead, boys, if you like, but don't say I haven't given you fair warning. My name is Tom Bunter, Sheriff of Cordona County, and I mean what I say."

"Durned ef thar little man ain't got lots of pluck," said the surly landlord. "an' I hope he won't get hurt, but we've got to hev them thar galoots some way or other. Say sheriff!"

"I'm through," answered Tom Bunter. "Good-night, gentlemen!"

The sheriff closed the grating with a bang, and effectually shut off further conversation.

"That's all the chinnin' we're goin' to do, boys," said the landlord. "Bring on your sledges an' things."

Four men with sledge-hammers in their hands, hastily dismounted and approached the door.

"Give me one of them thar hammers," said the landlord.

He swung the heavy sledge-hammer over his head and brought it, with all the strength of his sinewy arms, against the door, just over the lock.

A shower of splinters flew out, but the only mark on the solid oak was a slight dent that would hardly be noticeable by a casual observer.

Another blow, with about the same result, and then three more from the other men.

"Mighty good door—that thar. It's got a heap more strength than I'd hev thought," said the landlord, as he stopped to rest, after pounding away with the hammer for about ten minutes.

His companions were still working at it, a number of other hammers and big stones having been produced.

"That's no use, boys. We'll hev to use powder," he said, as he saw how ineffectual were the hammers and stones.

"Why not get a beam, and pound it in?" suggested some one.

"Good idee. Thar's two big pines lyin' down below thar. Them'll fetch the door, quicker'n anything I know. Come on; let's bring 'em up."

With a whoop the crowd all mounted their horses and rode headlong down the hill.

Hardly had they disappeared, when the grating in the door gently slid aside and the face of the fussy little sheriff appeared behind the bars.

"All right, boys; keep it up, but I guess you won't get in here this trip," he said, as he closed the trap again.

"Now, boys," yelled the surly landlord, fifteen minutes later, as the crowd returned with the two pine trees. "Half of us will take one tree and half ther other. Then we keep up ther poundin' all the time, d'ye see?"

No sooner said than done.

The first blow from the great tree made the door tremble as nothing else had done.

"By gosh! This'll start it," yelled the landlord, delightedly.

Another blow!

The door shook, and there was an ominous crackling at the hinges.

Crash—crash! Crash—crash! Crash—crash!

The blows were falling steadily and rhythmically against the door and each time it gave a little more.

The powerful oak, with its iron bars, bolts and lock, could not stand against the attack much longer.

"Bang away, boys!" cried the landlord, encouragingly. "Bang away, and we shall soon be through it!"

Half a dozen more blows, and the door had broken away on the hinge side, while the iron bars were bent like strips of tin.

Again and again the heavy trees were brought against the door.

Whoop! Down at last!

The gate fell with a loud crash and a cloud of dust and splinters.

The lynching-party were inside the yard.

Another door!

Two blows of the battering-rams and the door—much weaker than that on the outside—lay flat!

"Now, drag 'em out, boys! We've had trouble enough to get 'em. Drag 'em out!" yelled the surly landlord.

There was a general rush toward the cells, and then a howl of disappointment.

The cells were empty!

"Well, gentlemen, you have broken down the doors and wantonly destroyed property owned by the county of Cordona. I know you, and I shall enter information against you all for malicious mischief," said the sheriff, as he coolly walked out of his private residence on the other side of the yard with his hands in his pockets.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW THE PRISONERS GOT OUT OF JAIL.

We have seen how the lynching-party were working on the outside of the jail, and how they at last got in, only to find that their game had got away.

Let us now see how the fussy little sheriff had managed to defeat the purpose of the lynchers.

"They must not have these prisoners," said the sheriff. "It would never do to lose the first I ever had in my charge."

"No, that would be rather rough on your record, I must admit, sheriff," said Josh White; "though, to be sure, it is a good deal harder to run a jail in Arizona than down in old Vermont."

"You will not let them have the prisoners, will you?" asked the Giant Horseman, in his impulsive way.

"Not if I can help it; but when the boys in Mezno get r'iled, by gosh! it's not an easy thing to say that they sha'n't have anything they want."

"Well, look here, sheriff; when Fernandez

talks to you like he did just now, it means that he's going to stand by you, and when he's with you, I tell you that you've got a mighty good man helping you," said Josh.

"That's what!" chimed in the young cowboy.

Bianca did not say anything, but she looked in her father's face with a glance of mingled love and admiration, that Sam Horton felt as if he would have given his right hand to see directed toward himself.

"Then there's Sam Horton and me, sheriff. We ain't as valuable in a fight as Fernandez there, but we can both pull a right smart trigger, and I don't think either of us is much given to backing out of a scrimmage," said Josh White, with a glance of modest confidence at the young cowboy.

"The sheriff can rely on me," declared Sam Horton, examining his pistols.

"And me!" added Bianca, with a smile.

"Good!" emphatically ejaculated the sheriff. "Durned good! If I had a daughter, miss, I'd like her to be just such a girl as you. I'd be proud of her. Blame my cats! I'd be mighty proud of her."

"I guess her father is rather proud of her, ain't you, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Gosh! All he says is 'Si, señor,'" thought Sam Horton. "I'd like to see that man get warmed up just once."

"What's the plan of action, sheriff?" asked Josh White. "We must have a pattern before we can cut out the coat, as we used to say in old Vermont."

"We must wait and see what they do, that's all," returned the sheriff.

"We know what they'll do. They'll just come here and try and break down the door," remarked Sam Horton.

"Let 'em try. They will never get through that door," answered the sheriff, as he felt the bars to see that they were all right.

"Don't be too sure, sheriff. We never swear that a thing can't be done until it has been tried, down in old Vermont."

"Well, if they get in, we must fight them," said the sheriff.

"You mean that?" asked Josh White.

"Of course I mean it! What else can we do? I'm sheriff, and these are my prisoners. I know that they ought to be hanged, but I propose to prevent their being hanged until the court decrees it. You hear me?"

Josh White impulsively seized the hand of the fussy little sheriff.

"Sheriff, you're clear grit, and I like you. I only wish that you'd been born in old Vermont."

The Giant Horseman did not speak, but he grasped the hand of the sheriff and gave it a squeeze that made the little man's arm tingle clear up to his shoulder-blade.

Then Sam Horton shook hands with the sheriff, and, to cap the climax, Bianca put her soft hand against Tom Bunter's horny palm, until the fussy little sheriff felt completely overwhelmed.

His wife would probably have shaken hands with him, too, but, as she said afterward, he thought he was a hero already, and she did not want to see him puffed up with conceit any more.

"They are coming," said the Giant Horseman, quietly.

"So they are, Fernandez. Sheriff, we had better get these horses to the rear, hadn't we?" suggested Josh White.

"Yes, I'll take them to the back yard," replied the sheriff.

"Never mind, Tom. You attend to business here. I'll take care of the horses," interposed Mrs. Bunter.

"She's a useful woman at a pinch," remarked the fussy little sheriff, as his spouse led the horses away.

"There they are," said Josh White, as the sound of the surly landlord's pistol rapping on the door made him start.

"Yes; there they are, and they seem to mean business," added the cowboy.

"Si, señor."

"I don't feel like taking any notice of them. They can't be after any good, at this time in the morning," answered the sheriff.

"That's all right, but the easiest way is the best way, as we used to say in old Vermont," remarked Josh White.

"Always ready with some old Yankee saying, Josh. They must have a big warehouse full of ancient maxims down in old Vermont," laughed Sam Horton.

The sheriff opened the little grating, when the colloquy detailed in the previous chapter took place.

When the grating was again closed the sheriff looked around at his companion in a questioning way as if he hardly knew what to do next.

"Well, sheriff, they evidently mean business," said Josh, when the first blows of the sledge-hammer fell on the door.

"They won't do much business that way,"

The Giant Horseman.

Queredo rolled up his sleeve and showed that his right arm was bleeding.

"Hello! What's that? Where did you get that scratch?"

Queredo pointed to Gila Jim's revolver in his belt.

"What? Did I shoot you? Well, I'll be darned! If it had been anybody but you, Queredo, I bet it would have gone through his head. You were born to luck, Queredo."

It was even as Queredo intimated.

The stray bullet from Gila Jim's pistol had plowed along the flesh of the dwarf's arm, and though not making a serious wound, had made it bleed freely.

They had nearly reached the thicket that hid the river and the entrance to Camp No. 1 when Gila Jim suddenly reined up.

"I don't know, Queredo, what is the use of going into camp now. I think the less we go backward and forward the better it may be for us. We don't know who is watching us now. Ain't that your opinion?"

The dwarf nodded.

"Besides, I have work to do, and I want to do it now before daylight, if I can."

As he spoke, the Giant Horse wheeled around and trotted quickly but determinedly in the direction from whence they had just come.

"Stop, you brute," commanded Gila Jim, as he pulled the reins with all his strength, and tried to check the gigantic animal.

He might as well have tried to stop a locomotive by pulling at it with a clothes-line.

Nebo had evidently made up his mind to go back, and go back he did.

"Well, blame my cats! If this don't beat anything I ever saw," ejaculated Gila Jim, tugging at the bridle.

The dwarf indulged in one of his loud creaking laughs.

"Shut up, you devil's imp!" roared Gila Jim, wrathfully. "If this big beast takes us into trouble you will get your share of it. I don't see what you are laughing at."

But Queredo only laughed the louder.

He saw something so irresistibly comic in the idea of Gila Jim—who boasted that he understood horses better than any one else in Arizona—being carried away against his will—that he would have laughed if he was to be shot for it the next minute.

Meanwhile Nebo trotted on, regardless alike of Gila Jim's oaths and the dwarf's laughter.

Where was he going?

His course was straight back to Mezuto City.

"We can't go back there. I'll sit here a little while longer, and then if I find that I can't do anything with him, I'll shoot him dead and walk back to camp," declared Gila Jim.

A peculiar gleam shone in the dwarf's restless eyes.

A gleam that it was easy to read.

It meant that he would have something to say about that if it came to an issue.

Queredo had nearly got over his superstitious fear of the Giant Horse by this time, and he made up his mind that he would bend the powerful animal to his will if he ever got him to himself again.

At all events Gila Jim should not shoot the horse.

"Yes, he's taking us right straight into Mezuto, sure enough," muttered Gila Jim, as Nebo, kept up his steady trot.

The dwarf threw his elbows back, and expanded his chest, as if bracing himself for an expected encounter.

"Curse the horse! It seems a pity to kill him, but Gila Jim never went back on his word yet, about anything. He's got to die!"

They were very near Mezuto City now, and the faint streaks of daylight in the eastern sky gave token that dawn would break in a very few minutes.

Gila Jim felt that his safety would not brook any further hesitation.

"You had better get down, Queredo. I am going to put a bullet in him. He is a good-looking horse, and I hate to do it; but he's been badly trained, and he is no use to me. I guess he is all right with that big Spanish-looking fellow that used to own him, but I ain't saving horses for him."

Queredo did not make any sign that he heard Gila Jim's remarks, but still stood on the edge of the saddle, with his hands on his companion's shoulders.

"Get down, Queredo."

The dwarf did not move.

"Do you hear what I say?"

No sign from Queredo.

"Get down!"

Queredo stood quite still.

They were dangerously near the beginning of Mezuto City now.

"Get down, you imp, or—"

Gila Jim swung around in his saddle to seize the dwarf.

Like a flash Queredo leaned over and dragged the Winchester from its sheath with one hand, while he grasped the revolver from Gila Jim's belt with the other.

"You imp!" howled Gila Jim.

Queredo held the cocked six-shooter under Gila Jim's nose, and the desperado saw the gleam in

Queredo's eye which told as plainly as words that he would shoot if necessary.

"What do you mean by this, Queredo?"

Queredo pointed to the horse's head, then shook the revolver, then shook his own head negatively.

"Oh, you don't want the horse killed, don't you? Well, I'd like to know how you are going to prevent it."

The dwarf moved the pistol significantly until the muzzle was exactly on a level with Gila Jim's eye.

"Ah, yes; exactly! You've got the drop on me. That's so!"

The dwarf chuckled.

"Give me that pistol. I'll not try to shoot the horse," said Gila Jim, in a conciliatory tone. "I won't—honest!"

Nebo stopped.

"Darned if the horse hasn't changed his mind, after all!"

The dwarf lowered the pistol.

"Come, Queredo! I was only fooling, anyhow. Hand me that gun."

The Giant Horse turned himself around, but did not seem in a hurry to move on in any direction.

He evidently did not mean to go into Mezuto City, at all events!

"Give me that gun, Queredo."

The dwarf held the revolver tantalizingly before Gila Jim's eyes.

"Are you going to give me that gun?"

Queredo slowly handed the revolver to Gila Jim, with the muzzle toward the latter.

Gila Jim snatched the weapon with a howl of triumph.

"Now, you little imp, I have you! Say another word, with your infernal big head or your devilish eyes, and I'll bore a hole through you, as well as the horse!"

Gila Jim swung the pistol around so as to get the butt in his hand the muzzle toward the dwarf.

Even he could fully accomplish the maneuver, however, the revolver flew out of his hand, struck by a rifle-ball.

And the dwarf held the Winchester, which he had kept in his left hand, behind Gila Jim's back, all the time, with the muzzle pressed hard against the desperado's breast.

"Euchered again, by gracious!" hissed Gila Jim, through his set teeth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OATH OF BLOOD.

QUEREDO laughed uproariously.

Independently of the fact that he did not wish to see the Giant Horse killed, he enjoyed beating a man like Gila Jim.

Gila Jim had always treated him with considerable contempt, though admitting that he possessed considerable shrewdness.

But the captain of a gang could not be expected to lavish much consideration upon so insignificant a member as Queredo, and hence Gila Jim had been in the habit of assuming lordly airs that rather grated on the nerves of the irascible dwarf.

"Queredo, put that gun down," said Gila Jim as soon as he could control his rage sufficiently to speak quietly.

The dwarf only chuckled.

"Won't you trust me when I tell you I will not try to get ahead of you again?" asked Gila Jim, earnestly.

The dwarf grinned and shook his head very decidedly.

"Well, I suppose I can hardly blame you. I didn't act very white just now, I know. But, then—I didn't know you had a rifle, d'ye see?"

Queredo nodded his head energetically to signify that he certainly did see, and that he understood Gila Jim's motives, unmistakably.

"Well, see here, Queredo. You have the drop on me now."

A chuckle and a nod from Queredo.

"Then what harm can I do if you do take that darned gun away from my chest? Your finger might slip, and I'd be blown to kingdom come before I could say good-by."

The dwarf howled with delight.

"Hurry up, now, Queredo. It will be broad daylight in a very few minutes. I can't ride along with that gun pointed at me, even if I could make this horse go where I wanted, which is very doubtful."

As if he understood the words of the man on his back, Nebo walked slowly in the direction of the rocks behind which was the secret entrance to the Great Lost Silver Mine, which was the home of the Giant Horseman.

Queredo suddenly leaped to the ground, carefully covering Gila Jim with the rifle again, as soon as he reached *terra firma*.

"Queredo, are you going to let me get down?" asked Gila Jim, humbly.

Queredo nodded.

"All right. Thank you for that much," adding inwardly: "If I had a gun for a minute I'd take it out of you."

Gila Jim walked slowly along behind the Giant Horse, who was making straight for the rocks.

Queredo, a few yards from his companion, held his rifle ready for instant use.

"See here, Queredo, that horse is going to the cave that I and Sandy were in for a few hours. If we can find our way in there now we shall be able to hold the fort against the Giant Horseman himself, and wipe out that Yankee detective at the same time, perhaps."

The dwarf nodded, but did not relax his vigilance.

The Winchester was still carried in such a way as to prevent Gila Jim becoming too familiar or coming too near.

"Put that gun down, Queredo!"

The dwarf shook his head.

"How can we arrange anything while you hold that thing with the muzzle pointing toward me all the time. I won't try any monkey business with you again. I don't need to do so, anyhow. The horse is all right. I only said I'd shoot him if he took us into Mezuto. Well, he isn't going into Mezuto, and that settles it."

He looked inquiringly at the dwarf, but could not see any signs of relenting in the beady eyes.

"What d'ye say, Queredo?"

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

"Will you take Gila Jim's word?"

An emphatic shake of the head from the dwarf.

"You won't?"

Another shake.

"Will you believe my oath?"

The dwarf made a peculiar sign with his outspread left hand.

Gila Jim started.

"I can't do that," he muttered.

The dwarf's quick ear had caught the words.

He brought the rifle up so that he could easily stop any hostile demonstration on the part of Gila Jim, and made the peculiar sign again.

Gila Jim looked in every direction, as if seeking a means of escape.

Queredo watched him closely.

"Well, Queredo, I'll—I'll—do it," said Gila Jim desperately.

The dwarf bowed his head.

Gila Jim pulled up his right sleeve and bared his arm.

Then he drew his bowie-knife from its sheath beneath his coat, where it had escaped the vision of his captors when surprised on the mountains.

"Queredo, I swear by the red cross that I will bury our present quarrel forever, and that the next one must come from you!"

The dwarf nodded his head in a satisfied way.

Then Gila Jim pricked his arm four times with the point of his bowie-knife in the form of a cross.

With his left hand he pressed the arm until the blood flowed.

He put the end of each finger in turn in the blood, and spreading his hand, threw a drop toward every cardinal point of the compass—north, south, east and west.

Queredo nodded his hearty approval of the proceeding.

Gila Jim walked toward him with his right hand out, and the dwarf shook it heartily three times.

According to the usages of the Red Cross Gang, the feud was buried by this ceremony and could not be revived.

Queredo knew that he was perfectly safe now.

Any member of the gang who should dare to break this his terrible oath would be shot down without mercy by the first man who heard of the transgression.

Gila Jim had found it a bitter pill to swallow in this instance, because he had promised himself the pleasure of thrashing the dwarf as soon as he got a chance.

But he had seen that the Giant Horse was moving towards the secret entrance of the cave as if with a purpose, and he had seen enough illustrations of the animal's sagacity to hope that he might render assistance now in finding the way into the Great Lost Silver Mine of Arizona.

While he was quarreling with Queredo he could not do anything, and hence he was constrained to settle it at any cost to his pride and spirit of revenge.

For this reason he had consented to take the terrible "Oath of Blood."

Nebo walked quietly along, and Gila Jim and Queredo, side by side, followed.

The dwarf picked up the pistol which he had shot from Gila Jim's hand, and which he had just noticed on the ground, and handed it to his companion, keeping the Winchester himself.

"You are fixing things your own way, Queredo, but I suppose the arrangement is a good one," remarked Gila Jim as he took the pistol.

The dwarf chuckled.

He had the advantage now and he knew it. He had exacted the Oath of Blood from Gila Jim, and the latter dared not quarrel with him unless Queredo provoked it in the most pronounced manner.

The horse reached the rocks where Gila Jim knew the entrance of the cave was situated.

"Wonder what he will do next," said Gila Jim, as the horse stood and sniffed the air doubtfully.

Nebo hesitated only a moment.

He walked slowly up to a great smooth mass of rock that appeared to be the solid side of the mountain that had remained unbroken for ages.

"Right here somewhere at the door, I know," whispered Gila Jim, clinching his hands in the intensity of his eagerness.

Nebo put his nose against the smooth rock and moved his head gently up and down.

"By heavens, the horse is going to open it," gasped Gila Jim.

Queredo bent forward and watched the horse as excitedly as his companion.

Nebo pushed his nose hard against the rock and uttered a low whinny.

"There it goes!" yelled Gila Jim, not caring for the moment who might hear him.

The immense slab of rock swung aside and the way was clear to the heart of the Great Lost Silver Mine!

The Giant Horse walked quietly inside and the rocky door slowly swung back into its place.

But not before Gila Jim and Queredo had slipped through the opening.

The mysterious door closed with a slight clap, and the two men, with the Giant Horse, were in pitch darkness.

"The last time I was here as a prisoner. This time I am the proprietor!" muttered Gila Jim, triumphantly.

He struck a match, and seizing a fine torch that lay in a corner, lighted it and led the way forward.

Nebo had gone quietly to his stable in one of the recesses, feeling that he had earned his rest.

"Come on, Queredo. I've been here before, I know the way."

The dwarf raised his eyes and noted the glitter of the silver on the walls and ceilings.

Then he chuckled in a subdued tone that he always assumed when pleased.

"Pretty, eh, Queredo?"

The dwarf nodded.

"I guess we have the place to ourselves. The next thing is to examine our premises and see that there are no robbers hanging about. Eh, Queredo?"

The dwarf opened his mouth to let out a roar of laughter, but Gila Jim held up his finger warningly.

"Don't do it Queredo. Don't do it—at least not now. We don't want that big Spaniard or the Yankee detective to push us off from behind some of those rocks. We ain't sure that we are alone yet, my son."

The two walked cautiously along until they reached the little iron door in the corner, which, it will be remembered, shut off the principal living room of the Giant Horseman's home from the outer corridor.

It was securely bolted.

"Guess I was the last person that passed through that doorway," said Gila Jim, with a smile. "I remember shooting those bolts when I passed out."

He softly drew the bolts.

"Now, Queredo, I'll show you as pretty a room as you ever saw in your life."

The dwarf nodded and chuckled in anticipation.

"Hold that torch so that I can see the latch. It is a little awkward when you are not used to it."

The dwarf obeyed.

The red glare of the torch playing over the dwarf's hideous features and Gila Jim's intent face, revealed a picture as weird as any painted by the old masters.

It would not require much stretch of the fancy to imagine the two men lost souls trying to find their way back to the infernal regions through the little iron door.

"Darn this latch!" growled Gila Jim, impatiently.

The dwarf held the torch still closer.

"Mind, Queredo! You will set my head on fire."

The dwarf chuckled, but he moved the torch away.

Another tug at the latch, and it slipped back.

"Come on, Queredo!"

Gila Jim threw open the iron door, and dashed through, closely followed by Queredo.

"Hands up!" yelled the voice of Josh White, and four Winchesters covered the dwarf and Gila Jim.

CHAPTER XXIV.

QUEREDO LAUGHS AGAIN.

"WELL, if this isn't the darndest cheek I ever saw. It beats old Vermount all hollow," exclaimed Josh White. "Who'd have thought that they'd have come right into your little old bear trap, Fernandez? Don't it lay over anything in your experience in Arizona?"

"Si, señor."

"To think that we should catch the whole gang, too!"

"Pretty neat, Josh," put in Sam Horton.

"Neat! Well, I should say! Just had to walk right in and give themselves up, as it were, so that we don't have the trouble of hunting them. Gila Jim, you are a good one, and when you are hanged in Chicago, I'll take care that they use a nice soft piece of rope, so that it

sha'n't scratch your neck. Gewhillikins! This is a pleasure!"

Josh White slapped his knee in the extremity of his delight.

"Hold on, there!" he exclaimed, suddenly. "Play a trick like that again, and I'll blow the top of your ugly head off."

The dwarf had been raising his weapon slowly, until he had it pointed at the Giant Horseman.

"Throw that gun down!" he added. "And you drop yours, Gila Jim!"

The dwarf obeyed sullenly, but Gila Jim hesitated.

Then he fell back, as, with a cry of irrepressible hate, the young cowboy flew at his throat.

The revolver dropped out of Gila Jim's hand as the sudden onslaught forced him to the ground.

The dwarf made a movement as if to pick up his rifle, but the Giant Horseman's mighty grip was on his shoulder, and he was bundled, helpless, into the cell where Sandy spent several hours on the occasion of his former visit.

Josh White rushed forward to help the cowboy, who was rolling over and over in the embrace of Gila Jim.

"Keep away from me, Josh. I can handle him," said the young cowboy, as he managed to get Gila Jim beneath him.

Bianca, who, pistol in hand, had been standing quietly watching the progress of events, now came forward, with an anxious expression on her beautiful face.

"Let them alone, my daughter," said the Giant Horseman. "They are man to man."

"But, see, father, he has a knife!"

"Who?" asked Josh White, as he bent over the writhing combatants on the floor.

"Gila Jim!"

"So he has, by Jupiter! Here, you brute, give me that!"

Josh White wrenched the knife from Gila Jim's hand, and the next instant Sam Horton had overpowered his enemy, and, kneeling on his chest, asked the Giant Horseman where he intended to put him.

Fernandez opened the door of the dungeon, in which Queredo was confined, and Gila Jim found himself securely behind the barred door, in the power of those he had hoped to so easily overcome.

"Now, Gila Jim, I think we have you this time," said Josh White, as he looked through the bars at the prisoners.

"Have you?" was the defiant reply. "I'd like to know what you are going to do with me."

"Well, you will start for Chicago on the stage that passes through Mezuto City this afternoon. As for the rest of the gang, they will be attended to afterward."

"What do you want with me in Chicago?"

"You know what we want with you there," broke in Sam Horton, hotly. "I'm tired of hiding myself out here in the mountains, when I know that I am entitled to be in a respected position in Chicago. Not that I dislike the air of Arizona, but I want my rights and to see you punished."

"All very pretty," sneered Gila Jim. "If you had your rights, maybe you couldn't get such a good thing, after all."

"Well, that Eighth National Bank job will cook your goose pretty comfortably, I'm thinking," continued Josh White. "Once let me get you to Chicago and I can bring more charges than you will want to face in a day."

The dwarf, who had been listening intently, chuckled.

Gila Jim started as if he would have attacked his companion, but he remembered the sacred Oath of Blood, and, with an effort, controlled himself, as he said:

"Queredo, you know my hands are tied. Don't irritate me, if you can help it."

Queredo's only answer was another chuckle, louder than the first.

The dwarf took too much pleasure in irritating anybody to heed Gila Jim's request.

"What time does the stage pass through Mezuto, Sam, do you know?" asked Josh White.

"At noon. It gets to the next stage about six in the evening, and you make the train at Prescott at midnight. Then you have a straight run by the Santa Fe route to Kansas City, and so on to Chicago."

"Good, Sam. You're a regular railroad guide in yourself. We would have you bound in Russia leather, with gilt edges and a gold clasp, down in old Vermount."

"Father, are the other prisoners all safe?" asked Bianca.

"Si, my daughter."

"You're quite sure of that, I suppose, Fernandez?" added Josh White, anxiously. "They are a desperate lot of men, and moreover, the Mezuto crowd will give you trouble if they find out where you have put those fellows. You are positive they can't find their way in here? Eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"I should like to stay here and put the gang through now, if I could," said Josh, "but I want to get this fellow safely in jail in Chicago. Then I shall have my hands free for the Red Cross Gang."

"Si, señor."

"Where have you put the other fellows, Fernandez? You have so many little holes and corners in this big place of yours that a stranger never can tell where he is half the time."

"Follow, señor."

The Giant Horseman touched the spring of the large mirror described in a previous chapter, and it moved aside, disclosing the corridor and stairs leading to the upper exit in the mountain.

Fernandez took a torch with him and signaled to his daughter to bring another.

The mirror swung to again and closed the opening.

"Sha'n't forget the last time I went up these stairs, Fernandez," said Josh White. "It is a good thing to know that we have the little villain who scared us all with his laughing that time, safe under lock and key in your dungeon. Eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Where have you got these fellows, Fernandez? I don't see any place around here where you could put them."

The Giant Horseman smiled as he nodded his head to Bianca.

The girl showed them a door in the wall by the side of the stairs, and pushing back a heavy bolt, opened it.

They all pressed through the opening and found themselves in another corridor, about the same size as the one they had left, but with three dungeons, each guarded by iron-barred doors let into the wall.

Two of the prisoners were in each cell, and the whole six blinked as the light of the torches fell on their eyes.

"Kind of hard keeping them in such black darkness, don't you think, Fernandez?" said Josh White.

"Si, señor."

"Um; well, they are a tough gang, and I suppose they deserve it," continued Josh White, a little doubtfully.

"That is not the only reason, señor."

"Oh, you have another reason for it, eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"What is it?"

"Their own safety, señor."

Josh White whistled.

"Do they want to be left in the dark, then, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"Is there any likelihood of the boys finding their way in here, do you think?"

"Not a likelihood, but a possibility."

"You are right to take all precautions, Fernandez. I'm from old Vermount, and I don't believe in Judge Lynch."

"Say, how long is our sojourn in these confined quarters to continue? I am looking forward with eager anticipation for the termination of our incarceration," said a subdued voice from one of the cells.

"Hallo! there's Sandy. I'll bet my pile," broke in Sam Horton, with a laugh. "I suppose he has been polishing up those big words ready to paralyze the first person he could get a chance at."

"Well, Fernandez, they a pear to be safe enough where they are."

"Si, señor."

"Senior, how is it that you have so many dungeons in this place? It wasn't made for a prison, was it?" asked Sam Horton, curiously.

"That is easily explained," replied the Giant Horseman. "You know that there is a great deal of silver in this mine. I am not working it now, but, I did a few years since. The metal was procured in almost virgin purity. Some place had to be found to store it, and I built these dungeons and put the iron doors on them. There was always the danger that people might find their way into the mine by accident. I did not propose to let them take the silver that I had worked if I could help it, and so I put these cells in out-of-the-way places. I have plenty more in different parts of the mine, that I can use, if necessary."

Sam Horton listened open-mouthed to the careless description of this wonderful place by the Giant Horseman. Then he looked at Bianca, and his heart sunk as he thought what boundless wealth stood between him and the realization of hopes that he hardly dared to confess to himself.

Perhaps Bianca had some idea of what was passing in the young man's mind, for she gave him a kindly glance that made his heart leap with a new-born hope.

"Well, Fernandez, things are all safe, here, apparently. Guess we might as well get down, eh?"

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman tried the fastenings of all the cells and assured the prisoners that no one could find them from the outside if they only kept quiet.

Bill Scruggins's face was still of the ghastly leaden hue that it had shown when he heard the lynching party at the outside gate of the jail, and all his companions, save Sandy, appeared more or less frightened out of their wits.

As for Sandy, he was of too philosophical a

The Giant Horseman.

turn of mind to express very much dissatisfaction with his fate, whatever it might be.

"Well, come on, Fernandez. Ready?" asked Josh White.

"Si, señor."

The four were just passing through the doorway from the corridor where the prisoners' cells were situated, when they heard a sound behind them that for the moment filled every one save the Giant Horseman with a nameless horror.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was Queredo's fearful laugh!

"Did you hear that, Fernandez?" said Josh White, in a whisper.

"Si, señor."

"It was that devilish dwarf's voice, wasn't it?"

"Si, señor."

"Could he get out of that cell in any way, do you think?"

The Giant Horseman shook his head, gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no doubt about it.

Queredo must be in the dark corridor somewhere!

But how had he got out of his cell and into the corridor in such a short time?

"Is there any other way into this corridor besides this, Fernandez?"

"I do not know of any."

"But it is just possible that there may be some secret doorway that you have never found, eh, señor?"

"Si, señor. Just possible."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By gosh! I can't stand this! I must go and see whether that little wretch is in his cell or not," exclaimed Josh White, as he darted down the stairs.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The dwarf's discordant laugh sounded almost in the very ears.

"I'll go back in this corridor and try and find out where he is," declared the young cowboy, as he drew his six-shooter from his belt.

"No; do not go. Let us return to the lower room. Perhaps we shall find some explanation of the mystery there," pleaded Bianca, placing her hand on the arm of the young cowboy.

Her touch thrilled him, and he felt as if he would dare the powers of darkness for her dear sake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By heavens! I'll try if a bullet can reach you, anyhow!" exclaimed Sam Horton, as he fired into the darkness.

The only result was another burst of fiendish laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

The dwarf was evidently out of reach of bullets from the corridor.

The Giant Horseman looked troubled as he gently pushed Sam Horton and his daughter out of the corridor, and closed and bolted the door.

"Come down, my daughter!"

The three went down the stairs and into the room they had just left.

There stood Josh White, with a pale face, looking into the cell in which they had placed Gila Jim and Queredo.

Gila Jim sat on a small stool, regarding them doggedly.

On the floor, with his big face turned toward the bars of the door, so that the light fell full on his countenance lay Queredo, the dwarf, apparently fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHAT THE LYNCHERS FOUND.

"Now, see hyar, sheriff," said the surly landlord, when the empty cells in the jail met the gaze of the lynching party. "This hyar thing is altogether too thin. You're hiding them thar men somewhar. Don't deny it, now."

"Who's trying to deny it?" returned the sheriff indignantly. "I ain't denying no'ing. You are doing all the talking. I'm only trying to show you fellows that when you elected me sheriff, you chose a man who wouldn't allow himself to be backed down in the execution of his duty, that's all."

"That's all right, sheriff. We ain't sayin' nothin' ag'in' you. But we want them thar prisoners, d'ye see?"

"Well, find 'em."

"We'll look for 'em, -owsomever."

"Go ahead, then."

"Go ahead, you say?"

"Yes, but don't damage any more of the county property than you can help. You've got enough to pay for as it is."

"Pshaw!"

"Yes, well, I'll show you all about 'pshaw.' You might as well take those bits of black cloth off your faces anyhow."

This was a bit of mendacity on the part of the worthy sheriff, but he considered that the end desired justified the means.

"You're a great old bluffer, sheriff, but that talk don't wash in this hyar river," said the surly landlord, with a grim laugh. "Guess we'll search the premises without takin' off our masks."

"Search away, and much good may it do you," returned the sheriff.

"Go through the upper rooms first, and then work down to the cellar, boys," directed the surly landlord.

"All right, Cap."

The party went through the house, searching in every nook and cranny.

Under beds and tables, in closets, wardrobes and recesses, and in garrets and on the roof, searched the party, but without result.

Mrs. Bunter accompanied the party and maintained a running fire of uncomplimentary remarks on the proceedings.

"If Tom Bunter wasn't a fool he would never let a lot of fellows ransack the house in this way. If I was sheriff I don't think they would get a chance to do it."

"How would you prevent it, my dear?" ventured the sheriff, mildly.

"How would I prevent it?" repeated the good lady. "Never mind how I would prevent it. I would do it somehow."

"But they broke the door down and got in. I couldn't stop that, could I?"

There was a good deal of force in this reply, but Mrs. Bunter was not in the humor to admit it just then, so she contented herself with telling her husband that he was a fool and gave her attention to the operations of the strangers, who were turning over her household treasures in their search for the vanished prisoners.

"If I see you pull out those bureau drawers again I will crack your skull with a 'poker,'" she cried, to a burly fellow who was recklessly dragging at everything in her bedroom.

The fellow did not answer, but as he went down-stairs he glared at her through the eye-holes of his black mask, and muttered to himself that he "pitied poor Tom Bunter."

"Well, gentlemen, have you found anything?" asked the sheriff, as the searchers stood in the yard after ransacking the upper part of the house.

"Not yet, but we will before we leave. They must be around the place somewhar," said the surly landlord. "That's so, b' gosh! Thar's ther cellar. Come along, boys!"

"Yes, there's the cellar. Search it well, boys, but if you find anything besides the four brick walls, you'll be smarter than I think you are," said the sheriff, as he watched them disappear down the stairway.

The men looked around, but a very few minutes' search convinced them that the cellar was indeed empty.

"Wal, now whar shall we look?" said the surly landlord. "Them thar men are somewhar, we know, but darn me ef I know whar to hunt any more."

Suddenly there was a shout from a group who were gathered in front of a certain part of the cellar-wall in one corner.

"What yer got, boys?"

"It's thar, sure!" said one.

"I'm a ghost ef it isn't!" came from another.

"What is it?" asked the surly landlord.

"What are yer all shootin' off about? What yer got?"

"It's holler."

"What?"

"It's ez holler ez er drum."

"What's holler? Darn yer skin! Why don't yer talk plain?"

"T'ier wall."

"Ther wall?"

"Yes. Listen!"

The speaker tapped at the wall with the butt of his rifle, and the sound given forth was not that which would have come from a solid brick wall.

"Them ain't no bricks, I'll sw'ar!" said the surly landlord.

"Bricks notbin'."

"Thar's a door thar, sure ez ye'r born. Whar's that thar sheriff?" howled the surly landlord.

He rushed up the stairs and found the little sheriff coolly standing in the yard, still with his hands in his pockets.

"Tom Bunter, you've been er-foolin' me, you skunk!"

"Have It!"

"Yes, yer know ez yer hev. Now, I want you to explain how to open that thar door down in the cellar. Yer needn't tell me ez ther ain't no door thar, 'cause I know there is. Come down, now!"

"So you've found a door down there, have you?" asked the sheriff carelessly, as he followed the other down the stairs.

"Tom Bunter, you are a bigger fool than I thought you were!" exclaimed Mrs. Bunter, who had been listening to the colloquy.

"Why, my dear?"

"Why, my dear!" contemptuously. "I suppose it is born in you, that's all."

"Could I help their finding a door? Maybe they'll be finding a hundred acre farm down there, after awhile, for all I know. They seem to be better acquainted around here than I ever was."

"Oh, quit yer chin-music and come down hyar," interposed the surly landlord, with rather more surliness than usual.

In the meantime the rest of the party had been

industriously sounding the hollow part of the wall with the butts of their rifles until they had pretty well determined the size and situation of the concealed door.

"Now, Tom Bunter, show us how to open that thar door."

"What door?"

"Look hyar, Tom," said the surly landlord, fiercely. "We've bin darned good-natured to you all through this hyar bizne's, but thar's an end to good-nature, an' we don't want any more o' yer foolin'. You know ez thar's a door in thar wall, an' you know how it kin be opened. Open it! That's all you've got to do. We'll take car' o' them fellers what's in thar, and you won't hev to lend nary a hand."

"You say there's a door there, do you?" returned the sheriff.

"Yes."

"You're sure of it?"

"Yes."

"You found the door all by yourselves?"

"Yes."

"Without my help?"

"Yes, we did. You thought you could fool us, but yer ain't quite smart enough. We kin find all ther concealed doors you hev in this hyar old jail, an' don't yer forget it."

"Well, if you are so darned smart, and can find out everything, suppose you find out how to open that door," replied the little sheriff coolly.

"Get them thar sledges," yelled the surly landlord. "We'll soon find a way to open this hyar door. Bring them hyar, an' I'll break it down myself!"

The sheriff's face wore an exasperating smile.

"You think we won't find them fellers, eh, Tom Bunter? I told yer we wouldn't leave till we had 'em."

"Go ahead!" was the sheriff's quiet reply.

Seizing one of the sledges that had now been brought, the surly landlord struck at the wall with all the power of his mighty arm.

"D'y'e hear how that rings, boys? That's an iron door, sure ez ye'r born!"

A few more blows and the paint that had been put on to resemble the surrounding bricks began to scale off, showing the iron underneath.

"See thar, Tom Bunter. Thar's yer door. What d'y'e think of it?"

"Maybe it's the door of a coal-house or something. You can't tell for sure."

"We'll soon find out what it is anyhow," was the response. "Hammer away, boys. She's beginning to shake."

The door was soon battered down, and the opening to the secret exit revealed.

"Now, boys' bring torches and let's fetch these fellers out!" shouted the surly landlord as he plunged into the darkness.

"You have destroyed some more of the county's property," said the sheriff, "and you will be held responsible. Don't forget that."

"Oh, shut up!" came the derisive command from half a dozen, as, torch in hand they followed their leader down the passage.

"Well, now, Tom Bunter, don't you think you have made a pretty night's work of this?" asked Mrs. Bunter, with considerable acerbity.

"I, my dear?"

"Yes, you, my dear," returned Mrs. Bunter, mimicking.

"What have I done?"

"What have you done? Why didn't you let them take the prisoners and hang them? That is all they are good for, anyhow. What did you want to set yourself up as a champion of the Red Cross Gang for?"

"And a little while ago you said I ought not to have let the boys into the jail at all, as if I could stand against that front gate and keep them out by sheer strength. I tell you, Mrs. Bunter, you are an unreasonable woman!" said the poor sheriff desperately.

"Unreasonable! What woman wouldn't be unreasonable I should like to know, with her house turned upside down by a lot of drunken russians. It's enough for a woman to have one drunken fool around her all the time."

The sheriff winced.

"I don't get drunk so often, my dear."

"You'd better not, either. But just to think of those rough brutes turning over all my things. I declare I could tear their eyes out," went on Mrs. Bunter, beginning to cry.

"There, don't weep, my dear!"

"Who's weeping, you old fool? I'll make some of them weep before I am through with them. I wish I had a husband that would take my part."

"I'll take your part, my dear."

"You! You can't take your own, or you wouldn't let people come here and run things their own way in spite of you."

The sheriff could not stand it any longer.

Seizing his Winchester, which rested in a corner where he had put it out of his hand while the cellar door was in process of demolition, he started toward the opening through which the lynching party had disappeared.

"Where are you going, Thomas Henry Bunter?" shrieked Mrs. Bunter, catching him by the coat.

"Never mind! Let me go!"

take care of myself and the property intrusted to my care. I'm going to make those fellows get off these premises or lose my life in trying."

"You come back here. You ain't going to do anything of the kind."

"Yes, I am. Let me go!"

"Come back."

"I won't."

"Come back, I say."

"I am going to clean out that crowd. You sha'n't call me a coward again."

"Who called you a coward?"

"You did."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did, and you are the only person who ever dared to say it to my face. Now, I'll show you!"

"Tom, come back here!"

"Let go of my coat."

"Tom!" coaxingly.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Tom, dear!"

"I'm listening."

"I know you are not a coward."

"Well, what made you say so, then?" asked the little sheriff, in a mollified tone.

"I was mad, dear, that's all. All my furniture and bed linen and things are turned over and mussed up, and it made me mad. You are just the best man that ever lived, and I'm proud of you, Tom. You have done your duty to-night better than the fellow you have saved ever will deserve."

"Think so?"

"Yes, dear. I know it."

The little sheriff gave his wife a hearty kiss, and the quarrel was over.

"Hark, Tom. Here they are back again."

"Empty-handed, of course. The Yankee detective and that big Spaniard, Fernandez, have the prisoners safely hidden away long before this," said the sheriff.

There was a roar of voices, as the lynching party came along the passage, waving their torches and all talking at once.

"Seems to me I can hear a strange voice among them," said the sheriff.

"So can I. It's a woman, too."

"Who in the deuce can it be?" said the sheriff. "Where would they find a woman, at this time of the morning?"

The roar of voices came nearer, and the glare of the torches reflected along the passage into the view of the sheriff and his wife.

"They are bringing a woman along, sure enough," said Mr. Bunter looking into the passage.

"We've got something hyar, Tom Bunter, but I'll be durned ef I know what it is," said the surly landlord, as the crowd burst into the cellar through the narrow doorway.

They dragged a prisoner with them—a woman—with a white face, and a hunted expression on her pinched features.

"What place is this?" she gasped, as she stood trembling in the midst of the group.

"Who is this?" asked Tom Bunter, looking curiously at the woman.

"What is your name?" asked the surly landlord, gruffly.

"They call me Mother Bess!"

"One of the worst members of the Red Cross Gang, by Caesar!" shouted the fussy little sheriff.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NEBO APPEARS AT THE RIGHT TIME.

"Now, is that fellow the devil or not?" said Josh White, looking dumfounded at the sleeping dwarf, who was apparently entirely oblivious of his surroundings.

"Si, señor," said the Giant Horseman with a slight smile.

"You think he is, eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"He is only pretending to be asleep," said Sam Horton, prodding Queredo with the end of his Winchester.

The dwarf slowly opened his eyes and blinked as if trying to remember where he was.

"What is the use of bothering him?" can't you let the poor wretch have a little peace?" said Gila Jim, with a scowl.

"How did he get out of this cell and where has he been, Gila Jim?" asked Josh White. "You know he got out somehow."

"I don't know anything of the kind. He has just been lying there ever since you shoved us into this place. How could he get out, anyhow?"

"I don't know how, but I know he did."

During the conversation, Bianca had disappeared.

It will be remembered that when she was entrapped in o this same cell by Sandy she escaped by a secret exit known only to the Giant Horseman and herself.

She was now carefully examining this exit from the outside to see whether it had been used lately.

She could not find any signs to indicate that such was the case. The hidden door looked as if it had not been touched since she used it herself.

Still this was the only explanation of the dwarf's presence in another part of the mine.

Even allowing that he had escaped that way, she could not understand how he had made his laugh heard in the upper corridor almost simultaneously with the time in which the detective had seen him lying in his cell.

The whole proceeding was shrouded in mystery.

She began to share the general belief that the dwarf was a supernatural being.

"He shall not get out that way again, at all events, she said to herself, as she fastened the little door on the outside. "If that is the way he got out he will find himself foiled the next time he tries it."

The girl went back to the rest, and found them still looking blankly at the unconcerned Queredo lying on the floor of his cell, with his eyes lazily opening and closing.

"I believe I'll sleep easier when that little imp is hanged," said Josh White, as he turned away from the cell.

"Fernandez, I think you had better keep those fellows where they are—I mean the other prisoners—until I get back from Chicago. I shall not stay there any longer than is necessary to put Gila Jim in jail."

"Si, señor."

"As for you, Sam, I suppose you will go back to work for Peters until the case is settled. I think you said that you have considerable property in Chicago in safe hands, didn't you?"

"Yes, Josh, I'd be pretty comfortably fixed if I dared to go back. I'm not rich, but I have enough thereto to keep me out of the poor-house with industry."

"You think you will live in Chicago, Mr. Horton?" asked Bianca, with a slight blush.

"I do not know. I like the air of Arizona, and I think I shall probably return to this section and stay here."

"If everything goes right, I suppose?" put in Josh White, dryly, as he cast a significant glance at the beautiful girl, who was just then examining the mountings of one of her pearl-handled revolvers.

"Of course," said Sam.

"Fernandez, do you think everything might be made to go all right, eh?" asked Josh White, looking straight into the eyes of the Giant Horseman.

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman spoke gravely, as was his wont but there was no hesitation in his reply.

"You mean that, Fernandez?" said Josh White, with a pleased smile.

"Si, señor."

"Fernandez, give me your hand."

The two men shook hands heartily.

"Sam, don't you want to shake hands with Fernandez?"

"Certainly."

The Giant Horseman grasped the hand of the young man and shook it with a warmth that Sam Horton did not understand at the time, but that was full of significance in the eyes of Josh White.

It proved that the Giant Horseman did not look with disfavor upon a state of affairs that was apparent to both Josh and himself, though the young cowboy and Bianca would have been surprised beyond measure had they known that any one had discovered their secret.

"The stage will not be along for several hours yet," said Sam Horton. "Suppose we go to the jail and see how the sheriff is getting along."

"No. We had better stay away for a while. The boys will bear the watch, and if they catch sight of us, may get an inkling of the whereabouts of the prisoners. We have taken a great deal of trouble to save their worthless necks. We don't want to lose them now. Eh, Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"You had better all take a little rest, I think," suggested Bianca.

"You are right, my daughter."

The girl retired to her own apartment, and the three men stretched themselves on the soft furs that were scattered around the room, each with his Winchester resting on his arm and his pistols ready to his hand.

In fifteen minutes all three were asleep.

Gila Jim and Queredo had been furtively watching the movements of their captors from the shadows of their dungeon.

The dwarf still lay on the floor, pretending to be asleep, but his eyelids were raised enough to permit him to see all that was going on.

Gila Jim sat on his stool with his head in his hands, as if lost in a gloomy reverie.

He was really on the alert for any chance that might favor his escape.

He had determined not to be taken to Chicago alive.

To a man who had spent years of his life on the boundless plains of the West, the prospect of confinement in a prison was worse than death.

"I'll eucher that infernal Yankee detective yet!" he muttered, as he glared balefully at Josh White's unconscious face.

As soon as he was convinced that the three men were asleep, Queredo quietly arose to his feet and walked to the back of the cell.

"Now is the time, Queredo," whispered Gila Jim, eagerly.

The dwarf nodded.

"You know how to open those cell doors?"

Another nod.

"Good! Hurry up, now!"

The dwarf stood in front of Gila Jim, with his face to a corner of the dungeon and his back toward his companion.

The latter grasped Queredo under the arms and lifted him up.

Queredo sprung at the same moment and stood on Gila Jim's shoulders.

He could now easily reach the ceiling.

He fumbled at it for a minute, and a small slab of rock shifted to one side, disclosing an opening about a foot square.

It was not the secret exit that Bianca had so carefully secured from the outside.

"Up with you, Queredo!"

The dwarf's big head filled the space, but he managed to squeeze it through.

The rest of his body followed easily.

Then he replaced the slab.

The dwarf found himself in utter darkness, but he evidently knew his way, and in another minute he stood in front of the cell in which the dignified Sandy was confined.

"Queredo, is that you?" asked Sandy.

For answer, the dwarf unbolted the door and allowed Sandy and the man confined with him to walk out.

Queredo struck a match which he drew from his pocket and lighted a pine torch that had been left by Josh White when he dashed down the stairs to investigate the mystery of the dwarf's laugh.

"Queredo, you would have graced an assembly of philosophers and psychologists," said Sandy, approvingly, as the six men stood in the corridor.

"Oh, cheese your dictionary cackle," said Bill Scruggins. "Let us get down to business."

Sandy gave his irreverent companion a severe look, but did not reply in words.

"Lead on, Queredo," he said to the dwarf.

Through a number of tortuous passages Queredo walked in front of the prisoners, occasionally holding the torch high above his head to show his companions the silver that glistened in the ceiling and walls.

"Don't see how he knows his way through here so well," muttered Bill Scruggins. "He must be some relation to Old Nick."

"His brother, I am confidentially informed," said Sandy.

"Why, where are we now? I can see daylight overhead," said Bill Scruggins. "Of course, this is the way we were brought in. But I don't remember going through all those winding passages to the cells, either."

"Guess you were too scared to remember anything, Bill," said one of his companions.

"Hal hal hal!" laughed the dwarf.

Bill Scruggins aimed a blow at Queredo's head, but the dwarf ducked and laughed again.

"Oh, let him go, Bill. There's nothing to be gained by entering into an altercation with him. I know that to my cost."

Bill Scruggins evidently appreciated the force of this remark, for he took no more notice of the dwarf's taunting laugh.

The party now stood in the corridor just outside the main entrance to the mine.

"What is the programme, Bill?" asked Sandy.

"There are only three of them, besides the girl," said Bill.

"She don't amount to anything," put in another.

"Don't she? Young man, you are laboring under a very pronounced hallucination if you think so," observed Sandy. "If you dismiss her from all consideration on account of a supposition that she is not likely to be a prominent factor in any disturbance that may take place, you will find yourself wallowing in a slough of astonishment and disappointment from which you may never emerge alive."

"Gosh! I wish I could talk like you, Sandy," said Bill Scruggins. "But I wouldn't be always making speeches, even if I could."

"Never mind about that. What is your plan?"

"As I said before, there are only three of them besides the girl, but they are all armed, and we ain't, except with knives that we might never get close enough to use."

"Oh, well, don't despair before the conflict is commenced," interrupted Sandy.

"Now, the plan is this. We will let Gila Jim out firs'. Then, with Queredo, we shall be eight, against three men and a girl."

"Well?"

"Well, we must get quietly into that room and grab their weapons without waking them up."

"Yes?"

"Then—"

"Go on."

"We must first put them all out of their misery."

"Murder? Kill 'em all in cold blood, eh?"

"Well, Bill, I don't like that. I should like to give them a chance for their life," said Sandy,

The Giant Horseman.

forgetting to use long words in the earnestness of the moment.

"It is them or us. You know that, Sandy."

"That is true."

"Well, then, come on."

"All right," said Sandy with a sigh. "If we must, we must. But I don't like it. It ain't exactly in my line."

The dwarf extinguished his torch and crept quietly forward, the others following.

He reached the iron door that led into the inner chamber—the door through which Gila Jim escaped when first brought into the mine with Sandy and which has been so often described.

Gently he shot back the bolts and drew the door open.

Gila Jim, behind the iron bars of his cell, was looking anxiously for the dwarf's appearance.

Queredo stepped softly across the room, and secured the key of the cell, which he had seen Josh White lay carelessly on the piano.

The lock was turned and the bolts pushed back.

Gila Jim stepped out.

"Now for their weapons," whispered Bill Scruggins.

Gila Jim, Bill Scruggins and Queredo reached the place where the three sleepers lay side by side.

Their rifles were gently lifted from the arms of the unconscious men, and Gila Jim, the dwarf and Bill Scruggins walked on tip-toe toward the doorway, where the rest of the gang were standing watching.

"May as well shoot them right now," whispered Bill Scruggins.

"I hate to do it," replied Gila Jim. "I should like them to be awake so that they could see who was going to wipe them out."

"Then we might never have a chance to do it at all."

"That's so. I'll take that cursed Yankee," hissed Gila Jim, vindictively.

"All right. You fix the big fellow, Queredo."

The dwarf nodded.

"And I'll settle the other."

"All right," said Gila Jim. "We'll all fire together!"

The three desperadoes raised the Winchesters and each took straight aim at the heart of his intended victim.

"When I count 'Three' fire," whispered Bill Scruggins.

The dwarf and Gila Jim both nodded assent.

"One—two—"

Crash!

There was a fearful commotion at the doorway among the desperadoes gathered there.

One man lay a bruised corpse on the ground, while the others tried to keep out of the way of two iron-shod heels that were lashing out in all directions.

The Giant Horse!

The three rifles were discharged, but all missed their mark.

Gila Jim, Scruggins and the dwarf had involuntarily turned their heads at the noise and their shots had been wild.

Before they could take aim again, the Giant Horseman had wrenched the rifles away from Gila Jim and Queredo, and dealt Bill Scruggins a blow that felled him like an ox.

Nebo had saved the life of his master and his friends.

"What is it, father?" asked Bianca, rushing into the room, with a pearl-handled revolver in each hand.

"Nothing, my daughter!" was the quiet reply of the Giant Horseman, as he fastened Queredo and Gila Jim in their cell once more.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE CANYON.

"Now, Gila Jim, I shall have no mercy on you if you try to play me any tricks," said Josh White to his prisoner, as they stood behind the rocks near the entrance of the Giant Horseman's house, waiting for the stage that was to take them on the first part of their journey toward Chicago. "You can see that the game's up, and it will be for your own benefit to go quietly. You see, two of the gang were killed this morning."

"Two?" asked Gila Jim.

"Yes. Bill Scruggins's skull was fractured when Fernandez hit him with the butt-end of that Winchester, and the other fellow, you know, was kicked to death by Nebo."

"Curse that fellow and his horse, too," hissed Gila Jim.

"That's all right. I guess your curses won't hurt them any. It takes a grandfather or a parson to make a curse tell, as we used to say in old Vermount."

"Are you going to keep these bracelets and shackles on me all through the journey?" asked Gila Jim, shaking his handcuffs and looking down at the fetters on his ankles, which were joined by a strong chain that just allowed him to walk without taking very long steps.

"Well, yes, Gila Jim. You're a little too slick to be given any chances. Let me look at those wrists of yours again."

Josh White took his prisoner's hands and tightened the handcuff on each wrist.

"Do you want to take all the skin off?" grumbled Gila Jim. "There is no use in torturing a man."

"I don't propose to let you slip them any more. You've fooled me that way twice, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Gila Jim, contemptuously, muttering, under his breath: "Take care I don't do it again."

The Giant Horseman had come outside with Josh White and his prisoner, but had gone back again when convinced that the detective had Gila Jim too secure for any chance of escape.

Josh White had two pistols in his belt and his Winchester in his hand.

Gila Jim was entirely disarmed; at least his captor believed so, but concealed under his shirt the desperado still had his knife.

He was firm in his resolve not to be taken to Chicago alive!

"Here comes the stage!" said Josh White. The great lumbering machine, with its four horses in a gentle trot, rattled out of the street of Mezuto City, coming straight toward them.

Josh White had already made his arrangements with the driver, who was therefore on the watch for him.

"Who's inside, Bill?"

"No one."

"That's good."

"Ain't got no passengers at all, but you."

"That's better. Take us out of this as soon as you can."

"Cert."

Josh White pushed Gila Jim into the coach and followed himself.

"Now, Gila Jim, you sit there, and I'll put myself on this other seat opposite."

Gila Jim seated himself sullenly, just as the driver started his horses for their trip over the plain.

"Don't you move," went on Josh White. "I don't trust you a cent's worth, and though I'd like to take you to Chicago alive, I'll land your corpse there sooner than nothing. *Verbum sat sapienti*, as we used to say at college in old Vermount. Geewhillikins! I didn't think I could remember so much Latin."

Gila Jim did not answer.

He was thinking deeply, and trying to hit on some means of getting out of his predicament.

His rage at being trapped just when he thought the game was in his own hands almost overcame him.

Could he have carried out his attempt to destroy the Giant Horseman, Josh White and his much wronged brother, Sam Horton, at one blow, he would have been not only free from all danger, but would, with his companions have been the possessor of the great Lost Silver Mine, with its absolutely immeasurable wealth.

Curses on that horse!

But for him the fatal shots would have been fired, and he would now be safe and many times a millionaire, instead of a helpless prisoner, in the hands of a man he hated with all the intensity of his vindictive nature.

The horses were galloping alone and the stage was rumbling and jolting on its road toward the East.

Gila Jim looked out of the window.

The coach was just entering a canyon, with high pine-clad walls on each side.

The whole gang could hide among those trees if they wanted to tackle this coach, thought Gila Jim. "I've sometimes had an idea of taking the boys on an expedition of that kind. Too much risk though. I guess it was better not to do it. But what difference would it make to me now? I'm caught anyhow."

"Wonder what that fellow is thinking about?" mused Josh White. "A silent man is generally turning something over in his mind. Unless he's deaf and dumb, of course."

The high rocks, with their clumps of pines, made the road very dark.

"Ever along here before, Jim?" asked Josh White, more for the sake of talking than because he cared for Gila Jim's answer.

"No; not since I first came to Arizona."

"How long have you been in those parts?"

"No, you don't. You ain't going to put me through any preliminary examination," said Gila Jim, with a longing look. "Get me into court, if you can, and let them ask me questions there, if they want to. I can please myself about answering them, but I don't propose to be interviewed by a detective if I can help it. And don't you forget it."

"Stop that old dry-goods box, Bill," yelled a voice from behind a tree, as a Winchester rifle was pointed at the driver.

The driver dropped his lines resignedly.

Josh White sat quite still, with his rifle ready to put a bullet through his prisoner should the latter try to take advantage of the confusion to escape.

"This ain't no road-agent business, Bill," continued the voice. "You needn't have no fear for your mail-bags or your Wells Fargo box."

"There's nothing in 'em and I ain't afraid for them. But what in 'nation is yer little game?" returned the driver.

"Who's in the coach?"

The driver gave vent to a long whistle.

"Whew! That's the object is it? Then good-

by, Gila Jim."

"Who's in that thar coach, I asked yer?" re-

peated the voice.

"Better you go and see," said the driver, leaning back in his seat and crossing one leg over the other carelessly.

The next instant a dozen men, each with black masks covering half their faces, leaped from behind the trees and swarmed on each side of the coach.

The lynching party.

The doors of the coach were forced open on each side, and Josh White covered with a dozen repeating rifles.

"Throw up your hands, Mr. Detective. We want this man."

"Why?"

Gila Jim was dragged out and thrown on his face on the ground.

"Show him why we want the man," said one of the party who acted as leader.

Three or four hands tore the shirt from Gila Jim's neck and showed the livid cross on his back.

"That's why we want him, Mr. Detective. No member of the Red Cross Gang is going to stand a chance of escaping the gallows while thar is a tree and a rope in Arizona. Bring him along, boys."

From their places of concealment behind the trees the horses of the party were brought.

Then the leader handed Josh White's rifle back to him.

"It ain't your fault, of course, Mr. Detective. You couldn't keep your man against a dozen of us. We broke down thar old jail last night, and that ought to show that we are in earnest."

"Where are you going to hang him?" asked Josh White. "Because I suppose that's what you mean to do with him."

"That's it exactly. We'll hang him just as soon as he shows us whar the camp is."

"I'll never show you that."

"Won't you? Well, even that don't matter, 'cause we know whar it is already."

"Who told you?" howled Gila Jim, his face distorted with baffled rage.

"Well, it were an old woman who called herself—What was it, boys?"

"Mother Bess."

"Yes; that was it—Mother Bess, and a nice old critter she is, too."

"The old hag! I wish I had my fingers on her throat for two seconds."

"Bill, you can drive on, unless this hyar gentleman wants to go along," looking at Josh White.

"No, I guess not. I'll go back with you. It's unlucky to resume an interrupted journey, anyhow. Or, at least, we used to say so down in old Vermount."

The driver cracked his whip and rattled on as unconcernedly as ever. He was used to all kinds of episodes in his life, and a lynching more or less did not excite him to any great extent.

"We brought an extra horse along, thinking ez how you might want to go back," said the leader. "Gila Jim can walk."

Josh White accepted the horse and rode along with his masked companions, while Gila Jim, firmly secured with a lariat that was fastened to the leader's saddle, and with his heavy fetters weighing down his footsteps, plodded wearily along in the midst of the cavalcade.

His last hope of liberty was gone.

"I'll die!" he muttered, "but not by the rope. I'll fool them in that anyhow."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ALKALI QUICKSAND.

In the excitement attending the advent of the Giant Horse, and the capture of the gang, no one noticed that Sandy was missing.

He had his doubts about the success of Bill Scruggins's plan, and had made up his mind to keep in the background until assured that everything was safe.

So he hid himself outside the iron door in a corner where he could hear without being seen.

He it was who first saw that the Giant Horse was coming down the corridor.

He had no chance to warn his companions before Nebo began kicking and stamping in the vigorous way that was the means of saving the life of Fernandez and his two friends.

As soon as the excitement commenced, Sandy ran at full speed along the corridor toward the main entrance of the mine.

Of course the great rocky door was closed, and, as Sandy did not know the secret of its fastening, it would be impossible to escape that way.

He turned to the right into what he supposed was one of the recesses which Fernandez sometimes used for stables.

Sandy intended to go into the furthest corner of one of these recesses, and hide himself until he saw a suitable chance to escape.

To his surprise, there seemed to be no back wall to the recess.

He groped on and on, and came to the conclusion that it was another one of the corridors

that extended for long distances in many directions in the Great Lost Silver Mine.

He would follow the passage. It might possibly lead him to liberty.

"The Lord knows whether I shall ever be able to find my way out again," thought Sandy, "but I have no alternative. I must go on. I am in for it now, and if I want to preserve my precious existence, I must not hesitate or prevaricate."

Occasionally, the black darkness through which he wandered was relieved by faint streaks of light piercing rifts in the rocky ceiling high above his head.

He was walking far away from the inhabited portion of the mine.

"Ah! What's that?" he muttered, as he distinguished a slight noise in the direction toward which he was traveling.

He stopped and listened intently.

"Yes, sure enough," he added in a convinced tone. "Knew I could not be mistaken. Wonder what it means? Don't want to avoid Scylla only to fall into Charybdis. Ahem! There's a couple of good jawbreakers! Well, I've got a revolver that I managed to grab just now, and I'll sell my existence at a high price if I do meet a foe."

He walked on resolutely with the revolver of which he had spoken in his hand.

The sound that had caught his ear was now too plain to admit of any doubt.

It was the uneasy movement of horses' feet.

Were the horses accompanied by their owners, who were, perhaps, searching for the very man walking slowly into their grasp?

That was the question!

"I'll soon settle it," said Sandy to himself, as he nerved himself for what he knew might prove a battle to the death.

A sudden turn in the passage brought him into a flood of light.

There was a great opening in the rocks above him, and the rays of the early morning sun came uninterruptedly into the corridor.

But what surprised and delighted Sandy more than anything else was the sight of four splendid horses, entirely free from the galling presence of straps, harness, or saddle, with plenty of hay and feed at their disposal, and soft beds of straw under their feet.

It was the stable in which the Giant Horseman kept his spare horses, and to which Bianca was on her way when she was seized by the Red Cross Gang.

Sandy had accidentally stumbled on the underground passage that led to the stable, and could now take his choice of a horse, if so disposed.

He was so disposed.

Hanging on large iron pegs driven into the rocky wall were saddles, bridles, and all the accoutrements necessary for the equipment of each horse, including Winchesters, lariats, whips, cartridge-belts, etc.

"Talk about luck!" chuckled Sandy, as he proceeded to saddle a magnificent gray that had caught his attention at first.

In a very few minutes Sandy had his horse ready.

With an irrepressible exclamation of exultation he sprang into the saddle.

"Ah! it is nice to be mounted again, and on such a handsome piece of horseflesh. The Giant Horseman's taste in equine property is anything but despicable!"

Sandy examined his Winchester, and found that it was ready for use, while he had enough cartridges in his belt to keep him supplied, until he was well clear of this scrape.

"The next thing is to get out of this," he thought. "There must be an exit somewhere in this neighborhood. If my judgment is not sensibly deteriorating I think I may say I am sure of that. I'll give the horse his head."

He let the reins lie loosely on the neck of his steed, and the noble creature, divining what was required of him, stepped out of his corner, and ambled gently along the corridor in the direction to which Sandy had been tending when he found the horses.

Ten minutes later Sandy found himself on the open plain.

The horse had found his way out by an intricate route that could hardly be discovered by a stranger, and there was but little likelihood that any one would reach the heart of the Great Lost Silver Mine by its means.

"The best thing will be to get to the Camp No. 1," thought Sandy. "I suppose that is the safest place now."

He turned the gray in the direction of the camp, and then suddenly stopped.

"I don't know," he reflected, "whether it is altogether safe to go straight there. Perhaps I had better go by a circuitous route. I will. I don't want to be stopped by any of these wild Mezuto fellows."

He galloped toward the right, so as to make a wide detour, and finally approach the river in which the camp was situated from the opposite side.

The gray was full of spirits. He had been in the stable for several weeks, and he rejoiced in his strength as he bounded over the plain.

Sandy, too, after his confinement in the dark,

underground cell in the Lost Silver Mine, felt the invigorating influence of the morning breeze.

"Get along, my beauty," he cried to the horse. "I don't care whether school keeps or not now. Once let us get clear of those fellows back there in the mine, and I believe I'll give up all crooked business, and settle down as a parson or a college professor, or something. This thing of feeling a rope around your neck all the while, gets excessively monotonous in the course of time!"

Sandy rode cheerfully along as he thought thus, but kept a sharp lookout for enemies notwithstanding.

He had got completely out of sight of the rocks from whence he had emerged from the mine, and with the thicket by the river away off on his left was circling around, so as to reconnoiter before venturing close to the trees that fringed the river on the other side.

"Not tired out yet, are you?" he said, as he patted the neck of the gray. "You don't see anything to frighten you, either, do you?"

The animal had thrown up his head, and momentarily checked himself, as if his senses warned him of some danger.

Then he resumed his easy gallop, as if he knew that he had alarmed himself unnecessarily.

The soil was of the sandy nature, interspersed with patches of grass, such as are common in parts of Arizona.

"Here's a good place to race. Try your mettle, my beauty," said Sandy, touching his horse lightly with his whip.

The gallant gray dashed forward.

His clean limbs stretched gracefully as he threw himself into a long stride that covered the ground like lightning!

"Ah! this makes me feel good," said Sandy, for the twentieth time.

He took off his hat and waved it in the exuberance of his spirits.

Then his hat dropped from his hand as he tried to draw in his horse!

His eyes dilated with horror, and his hair almost stood on end.

"Stop! stop! For the love of mercy, stop!" he yelled.

Too late!

The gray had been going at his full speed, and to check himself was impossible.

The intelligent animal realized his danger as well as did the terrified man on his back.

The keen instinct of the horse had warned him beforehand that peril of some kind faced him, but he lacked the human reasoning power which might perhaps have enabled him to determine its nature before too late!

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" yelled Sandy, again and again. "Must I die like a dog with no one near me?"

Like most desperate men the world over, Sandy was a coward when actually brought face to face with death.

There was a last desperate effort by the horse to avoid the fearful fate that awaited him, and then he plunged helplessly into his living grave!

An alkali quicksand!

These terrible traps are found all over Arizona, Colorado, and contiguous States and Territories.

Once in their slimy embrace there is no escape for man or beast!

Sometimes only a few feet in diameter, they are again found miles in extent.

No one has ever fathomed them and survived!

They preserve in their fearful depths their own secrets.

Sandy had suddenly come upon this quicksand when it was too late to avoid it!

As his horse leaped into it, Sandy took a last despairing chance.

He disentangled his feet from the stirrups, raised himself until he stood on the saddle, and leaped as far forward as he could.

Should the alkali prove to be only a few feet square, he might clear it at a bound and reach the solid ground beyond.

The almost inappreciable time that he was in the air seemed several minutes to him.

He had time to wonder whether his fate was sealed, or if he really would escape.

His feet touched the ground.

Ah! He was saved.

He had escaped—

No! The treacherous, slimy alkali, like gray glue, was crawling up to his ankles.

There was no solid ground within several yards of him.

He pulled one foot nearly out, but the other sunk to his knee.

Even in that moment of horror he turned to look at his horse.

The poor brute had already given up its wild struggles.

Too well it knew that its death was only a question of minutes.

The horrible composition had now reached its body, and was slowly but relentlessly rising.

Its head was upraised, to enable it to breathe as long as possible.

The love of life is as strongly implanted in the brute as in man.

Sandy noted all this as in a dream.

The alkali had nearly reached his waist.

Slowly—slowly—slowly he sank.

As in the case of a drowning person, Sandy involuntarily reviewed his past life.

He saw himself the respected merchant in a small town in Ohio, with a wife and child.

Then he remembered how neglect of his business, drink and gambling had brought him into difficulties.

The quicksand had reached to his chest now, as if in mockery of the wretched man expiating past misdeeds.

He saw how, one day, in desperation, he forged the name of a business acquaintance; how the police were set on his track; how, with the assistance of his faithful wife, he had managed to escape, and how he had drifted out to Arizona, and fallen in with the Red Cross Gang.

"Where are they now—my wife and child?" he cried, bitterly, as he felt the fearful alkali quicksand closing round his neck.

The gray's head had disappeared. The poor horse was buried forever.

Sandy looked up and took one despairing glance at the sky he would never see again.

He struggled convulsively to keep his mouth above the surface.

With his right hand he clutched the deadly stuff away from his mouth long enough to enable him to utter the name of his wife:

"Alice!"

It was his last word.

The gray slime settled into his mouth, his nose, his eyes, and as the sun that had been temporarily hidden behind a cloud sent its joyous rays over the landscape, it looked down on an alkali bed, beneath which man and horse were hidden from sight until the great day when earth and sea shall yield its secrets at the command of the Ruler of all things.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GILA JIM'S CONFESSION.

WHEN Queredo found himself once more in the cell which had been the residence of Gila Jim and himself for several hours, he made up his mind that he could not remain there for very long.

The four survivors of the Red Cross Gang were with him, but Queredo did not care anything about them!

When it was a question of helping them and getting away himself, he was not the man to let any unselfish considerations weigh with him.

Queredo always took care of Number One when he could.

Josh White had gone away with Gila Jim and the Giant Horseman, Bianca and the cowboy were the only persons remaining besides the prisoners.

"I suppose I had better get back to Peter's today, señor," Sam Horton was saying, not without some regret in his tone, as he looked at Bianca.

"Si, señor," said the Giant Horseman, quietly.

"You see, I cannot do anything until the case of that scoundrel comes up in Chicago," continued Sam.

"Hardly, señor."

"When they once prove the charges against him, as Josh White is sure they can, I shall be free to go back and take my place as an honest man before the world again."

"But you are recognized as such here, I know," said Bianca.

"Yes, señorita, but it is natural that I should wish to have my character cleared in the community that has been taught to look on me as a thief for several years, is it not?"

"True, señor," answered the girl. "It is no wonder you should feel so bitterly toward your brother."

Queredo, with his big head pressed close to the bars of the cell, had been listening to the conversation.

At the word "brother" used by the girl he had become violently agitated.

He shook the bars of the cell to draw attention.

"Well, what do you want?" asked the cowboy, coming toward the cell.

The dwarf eagerly made a number of signs that the cowboy could not understand.

"What the deuce does he want? Can you understand him, Señor Fernandez?"

"Si, señor."

"You can, eh? Well, you are smarter than I am, I confess."

"Si, señor."

"Of course, 'Si, señor,'" grumbled the cowboy, mentally. "Well, what does he want?" he added aloud.

"He wants a piece of paper and a pencil. Get them, my daughter."

"Why, I didn't suppose the rascal could write," said the cowboy, in astonishment.

Bianca brought several sheets of letter paper and a pencil, which the Giant Horseman handed to Queredo.

The dwarf took them and spreading the paper on the floor, slowly scrawled the words:

"Gila Jim is not your brother."

The young cowboy started with pleasure as he read the sentence.

"Can it be true?" he exclaimed, as he looked doubtfully at the dwarf.

"Si, señor."

"How do you know this, Queredo?" asked the cowboy of the dwarf.

Queredo chuckled.

"Can you prove it?"

Queredo nodded.

"Now?"

A nod.

"Well, do it, then."

The dwarf slowly shook his head from side to side as he chuckled knowingly.

Then he dropped on the floor again and wrote:

"What shall I get?"

The Giant Horseman read the paper and smiled grimly as he handed it to the young cowboy.

"What do you say about it, Señor Fernandez?" asked Sam Horton.

The Giant Horseman drew the cowboy away from the cell, so that the dwarf could not hear their conversation, and said:

"He evidently wants his liberty as the price of his information."

"Yes, señor, undoubtedly."

"We cannot give him that. He is the prisoner of Cordona county. We cannot let a member of the Red Cross Gang escape. You see that, señor?"

"Yes."

"We must try and get the proof of his statement from him on some other terms."

"Very well. Let us ask him what he really does want. Perhaps he will not ask for his liberty. He is shrewd enough to know that we could not give him that, even if we desired to do so."

They returned to the cell, where Queredo had been intently watching them and trying to get an inkling of their conversation.

"What is your price?" asked the young cowboy.

The dwarf hastily scrawled again on a piece of paper.

"Let me see Gila Jim die!"

"How can you do that? He has gone to Chicago, and so far as the authorities there know has not committed any crime that will bring him to the gallows. Goo's you don't know what you are talking about."

Again the dwarf wrote a short sentence.

"He will never get out of Arizona alive!"

"You think the miners will get him, eh, Queredo?"

The dwarf nodded confidently.

Then he wrote once more on his paper:

"I know it!"

"Perhaps you know when and where it is to take place. Do you?"

A nod.

"The deuce! Did you hear that, Señor Fernandez; did you hear that?"

"Si, señor."

"You know the time and place that Gila Jim is to be hanged in Arizona by the Mezuto City miners? Is that what I understand you to say, Queredo?"

The dwarf nodded an emphatic affirmative, while the four members of the Red Cross Gang in the cell with him shuddered as they thought of what might yet be their own fate if the miners discovered their place of concealment.

"How do you know?"

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

The gesture told as plainly as words that that was his own secret, which he would not reveal.

"But, see here, Queredo. If all you say is true the miners might take you, too, if they saw you at the hanging."

"They don't know me, and, even if they did, you could put me on a horse and disguise me," wrote the dwarf rapidly.

The cowboy read the words, and said:

"Well, when and where is it to be? We must know that if we are going to take you to the picnic."

The dwarf wrote: "I will tell you in time, but not now."

"What shall we do, Fernandez? It is for you to decide," said Sam Horton.

"Grant him his terms," replied the Giant Horseman.

"Thank you, señor. You can hardly tell what this means to me! If I can only get proof that I am not of the same blood as that villain, and then see my character cleared of the suspicion that has stained it so long, I shall dare, perhaps, to hope—to hope!" said the young cowboy, a dreamy look softening the expression of his steel-blue eyes:

"Always hope, señor," said the Giant Horseman, gravely.

"Well, Queredo, we accept your terms. Now, your proofs!"

The dwarf shook his head knowingly and pointed at the Giant Horseman.

"What does he mean, señor?" asked the young cowboy.

Fernandez gravely bowed his head toward Queredo, and said:

"I promise!"

The dwarf nodded his head in a satisfied way, and chuckled.

"He takes your word without hesitation, señor," said the young cowboy, slightly chagrined.

"Si, señor."

"You must not feel hurt, señor," said Bianca. "My father has always possessed the gift of commanding confidence. The dwarf believes you, but he wanted the infallible assurance of my father's word, to make him feel quite safe."

"The proofs, Queredo," said the Giant Horseman.

The dwarf thrust his hand into his shirt and drew out an old pocket-book attached to a cord around his neck.

He opened the pocket-book and drew forth a discolored sheet of letter-paper, folded:

On the outside appeared the words:

"Confession of Gila Jim, written when he believed himself about to die."

The young cowboy took the paper from the dwarf, opened it nervously, and rapidly ran over its contents.

"Señor Fernandez," he said, this paper says that Gila Jim was taken with a fever and believed that he was going to die, and he desired before doing so to do justice to one Arthur Markham, formerly of Chicago, now of Arizona. Then it goes on in these words:

"I, Gila Jim, who have claimed to be James Markham, brother of Arthur Markham, am no relation at all to the said Arthur Markham, having made the claim for several reasons of my own, prominent among which is the fact that the Great Lost Silver Mine of Arizona, partly the property of Saul Markham, the grandfather of Arthur and James Markham, is theirs, jointly with Fernandez Moreuci, better known in Arizona as the Giant Horseman. James Markham had been in the care of relations in England since childhood. He came to the United States to rejoin his brother, Arthur. I met him accidentally in New York, put him out of the way, and taking his clothing and letters, started for Chicago under the name of James Markham the day that his dead body was taken from the East River. The location of the Lost Silver Mine has never been fixed since, the clew to it having been lost, after being recovered once. Arthur Markham, known as Sam Horton, is entirely innocent of the robbery of the Eighth National Bank of Chicago, and of other jobs I have managed to fasten on him. All this I swear, as I do not expect to live another day. The proofs of who I say are in a sealed package in the hands of Hawkins & Blister, Attorneys, State street, Chicago. This letter is the warrant that entitles Arthur Markham to demand the package, upon proper proof of his identity. Signed, JAMES SMITH."

The dwarf had listened while the cowboy read the document, occasionally nodding his head as if to endorse its statements.

"Who wrote this? Gila Jim's signature is different to the rest of it. A man at death's door could hardly write all this, anyhow," said Sam Horton.

The dwarf pointed to himself and chuckled.

"You wrote it?"

A nod.

"Do you think it is true?"

Another nod.

"Señor Fernandez, do you believe it?"

"Si, señor."

"Then I am—"

"The son of my old friend, James Markham, and half-owner of the Great Lost Silver Mine," answered the Giant Horseman, shaking hands heartily with the young man.

"Sam Horton looked inquiringly at Bianca, who came forward and placed her hand smilingly in that of the young cowboy.

"Queredo, if what you have said is true, I suppose we shall have to let you see Gila Jim put through," said Sam Horton, as we will continue to call him. "Though it is more than I can understand how you know anything about it."

The dwarf laughed uproariously. He enjoyed mystifying people; but there was nothing very mysterious about his knowledge of the fate that awaited Gila Jim.

On the very night that Sam Horton slew Nosey Cripps, Queredo had been prowling about Mezuto City, unseen by anybody. It did not take him long to discover that Gila Jim's real character was known to every one in Mezuto and that he would be ruthlessly strung up if caught.

Queredo did not like Gila Jim, and though he was not traitor enough to absolutely betray a member of the gang, he did not propose to raise a hand to save Gila from his impending fate.

One of the loudest talkers among the residents of Mezuto City about the Red Cross Gang was the driver of the stage-coach, Bill Bowles.

Queredo heard him say that if Gila Jim tried to get out of the country by his coach he would give the boys warning, and they could stop the coach in the Big Canyon, with Winchesters, in the regular way, take their man and hang him at sundown within sight of the camp, if they could find out where it was for certain.

Thus, when Josh White took Gila Jim away at noon, the dwarf knew exactly what the programme would be.

It was late in the afternoon when the dwarf again shook the bars of his cell to attract attention.

The young cowboy was leaning over the piano, listening to the low music played by the girl and watching admiringly her slim fingers moving gently over the keys.

"What's the matter, Queredo? Rendy?" asked the cowboy, somewhat annoyed at the interruption.

He did not believe for an instant that Gila Jim had been captured by the lynching party, but thought the dwarf was simply planning an escape.

He would frustrate that, however, if he had to shoot the dwarf dead to do it.

The Giant Horseman, who had been visiting Nebo and looking after his comfort, stepped through the doorway.

"Queredo says he is ready. Will you take him out?"

"Si, señor."

The Giant Horseman opened the cell door a little way and seized the dwarf by the arm, then he searched him thoroughly to make sure that he had no weapons concealed in his clothes.

"Shall we handcuff him, Fernandez?" asked the cowboy.

"It is not necessary, señor."

The Giant Horseman gave Queredo a large sombrero that completely shaded his face.

"Good-by, my daughter!"

"Good-by, father!"

"Good-by, señorita," said Sam Horton, holding out his hand.

The girl smiled and gave her hand to the young cowboy.

"Watch the prisoners, my daughter."

"Never fear, father."

The Giant, bestriding Nebo, and the cowboy, on a handsome roan, rode each side of the dwarf, who was accommodated with a horse that would stand but a slight chance in a race even with Sam Horton's steed, and would not be worth Nebo's notice at all.

"Which way, Queredo?" asked Sam Horton.

The dwarf pointed straight ahead, and the three rode toward the trees which overshadowed the river and glowed in the crimson of the setting sun.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION—THREE AT A BLOW.

The lynching party rode swiftly and silently toward the thicket with their prisoner and Josh White.

The detective realized that he was powerless and that he had better submit to circumstances as gracefully as he could.

Gila Jim was doomed, that was evident!

It was drawing toward sunset when they reached the thicket.

"Here we are, boys. Bring him under this tree," ordered the leader.

Gila Jim was quickly dragged to a spot on the bank of the river where he could see the tree-trunks that hid the entrance to Camp No. 1.

Where was Mother Bess?

Might there not be yet some chance of escape?

He looked at the men surrounding him, their eyes glaring, through the holes in their masks, and gave up all hope!

A rope with a noose on the end was thrown over a great limb of the tree under which he stood. The noose was placed around his neck and drawn just tight enough for him to feel it.

"Now, Gila Jim, got anything to say?" asked the leader gruffly, who it is needless to say, was the surly landlord of the Mezuto City saloon.

Gila looked at him doggedly, but did not speak.

"Hold on, there!" cried a voice, and everybody save Gila Jim turned to see who had presumed to interrupt the proceedings.

"Hold on there!" repeated the voice. "If that man is harmed I shall hold you all responsible. I am the Sheriff of Cordona County, and that man is my prisoner."

A loud laugh greeted this announcement of the fussy little sheriff.

"All right, sheriff; we'll take the responsibility. Who's ther gal you have with yer?"

"Shut your mouth, you big rascal," screeched the voice of Mother Bess, for it was indeed that amiable lady who rode by the side of the sheriff.

"Mind, I've given you all fair warning that if you hang that man you will be liable to indictment for murder under the laws of Arizona," said the fussy little sheriff.

"All right, Tom Bunter. You just stan' back and see the fun," said the surly landlord.

The little sheriff, who now felt that he had made all the protest required of him in his official position, held his tongue.

In his secret heart, he would have liked to help pull the rope that was to end the career of Gila Jim.

"This woman is here to show me the location of the camp of the Red Cross Gang," said the sheriff.

"Yes, there it is—right beind those tree-trunks in the middle of the river. They look as if they are afloat but they are not. That is a little island, and—"

Mother Bess never finished the sentence!

With a howl of rage Gila Jim sprung at her and felled her to the ground with a blow of his fist.

A tremendous kick in the face from his heavy boot and Mother Bess was dead.

There was a croaking yell that sounded like nothing earthly.

Queredo bounded into the midst of the crowd and clutched Gila Jim by the throat!

"Hallo! Here's another of the gang, by Caesar!" cried the landlord, delightedly. "Up with him, too! Good-evening, gentlemen!"

The last remark was addressed to the Huge Horseman and Sam Horton, who sat quietly in their saddles watching the progress of events.

A very short time was sufficient in which to have Queredo with a rope around his neck, by the side of Gia Jim.

On the breast of each swinging body was pinned a piece of paper bearing these words:

"Red Cross Gang. Look at the marks on their backs for the cause of their death."

"Good-by, sheriff and gentlemen," said the leader of the lynching party, as they rode away. "Sheriff, you can take their rest back to jail if you like. We have settled with the worst part of the gang, and we can trust the law to take care of the balance."

"I'll indict you all for murder and malicious mischief, all the same," growled Tom Bunter.

But he never did it.

The four men confined in the cell in the Lost Silver Mine were taken back to jail the next day, and were eventually sentenced to long sentences in State Prison.

It took Josh White some time to get everything arranged properly for Sam Horton, but after going through a vast amount of red tape, he was able to tell Sam Horton that his name was thoroughly cleared, and that, as Arthur Markham, he could now face the world as an honest and honorable man.

The Great Lost Silver Mine, which the Giant Horseman had only worked in a desultory manner, was taken in hand by young Arthur Markham, and soon yielded so richly that both partners soon had unlimited ready money.

Tom Bunter got the jail into a better state of repair than ever. He swore off drinking the day that Gila Jim and Queredo were hanged, and as his wife has never complained of his behavior since, it is presumable that Tom is keeping his good resolution.

The Giant Horseman would not hear of moving away from the Silver Mine, as Arthur Markham suggested. He loves the free air of Arizona, and enjoys dashing over her plains on the back of his matchless Nebo. He avers that he will live and die there.

But, Bianca will not listen to this declaration. She thinks that when a certain event takes place, which will change her name to Mrs. Arthur Markham, she will be able to persuade her dear father to live in the style, in a city, to which he is entitled by birth, education and wealth.

Whether she will be successful or not we cannot say.

On the crest of a rocky promontory—a man of tall, commanding figure, sitting on a horse vastly above the ordinary stature of the equine race, is a noble figure in the clear sunlight of a faultless Arizona morn. The man bends down and caresses the neck of his beautiful steed, who utters a low whinny as he does so.

"Nebo, my friend!" says the man, in deep rich tones.

What expression could give a better index of the relations existing between horse and man?

There is not a man or woman, or child in all Arizona that does not know and respect Fernandez, the GIANT HORSEMAN.

THE END.

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